

Dakin Henderson  
3/20/17  
EDUC 208B  
Final Reading Reflection

One of my new favorite words is “mansplaining.” According to Google’s dictionary, it means: “(of a man) explain (something) to someone, typically a woman, in a manner regarded as condescending or patronizing” (Mansplain 2017). Lily Rothman in the Atlantic further specifies the term to indicate ignorance on the part of the man: “explaining without regard to the fact that the explainee knows more than the explainer, often done by a man to a woman” (Rothman 2012). Not only is the word phonically fun to say, but it is ripe to the point of dripping with the social prejudices, truths and injustices embodied in gender.

The concept of mansplaining was perhaps coined in Rebecca Solnit’s essay, *Men Explain Things to Me* (Solnit 2014) (although she did not in fact use the word itself), which opens with a scene of Solnit going to party hosted by a wealthy and imposing older man. The host, upon hearing that Solnit had recently published a book about a 19<sup>th</sup> century photographer, proceeded to tell her about another “very important book” about the same photographer. The book he was talking about, of course, was Solnit’s, but the man had to be interrupted several times by Solnit’s friend before realizing this. The two sexist motives behind his actions sum up much the problem with how women are treated by men in society. First, the host’s assumption that he knew more than Solnit—which, in this case, was laughably mistaken. And second, a complete lack of interest in anything she herself had to say.

The sexist violations carried out by mansplaining are strikingly similar to those of transmissive pedagogy in teaching. Transmissive pedagogy, which pours knowledge into young people’s brains like custard into a sieve, applies the same assumptions and indifference exhibited by the host of Solnit’s party—this time towards students rather than women. Consider this comment from a student in a 2001 study by Osborne and Collins: “This morning we were talking about genetic engineering. [The teacher] didn’t want to know our opinions and I don’t reckon that the curriculum lets them let us discuss it further” (Osborne & Collins 2001, p. 451). This is precisely the kind of “banking” system that Paulo Freire attacks in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005), where “the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly” (Freire 2005, p. 73). Lectures, the hallmark of transmissive pedagogy, involve one person speaking and the other or others listening. A teacher friend who was preparing to teach a class recently said to me, “lecturing requires a certain amount of ego” (private conversation, anonymous), compared to facilitating discussion, activities, or problem sets. These patronizing teaching tactics—telling with no regard for the opinions of the hearer—reek of mansplaining.

Transmissive pedagogy isn’t just patronizing; it’s ineffective. This has been demonstrated both qualitatively and quantitatively (just as life must be composed of a balance of masculine and feminine, so must arguments balance the qualitative and quantitative). In students’ own words,

the rote memorization and regurgitation of “facts” does not yield understanding: “A lot of what we do is just copying stuff from the board, so it doesn’t really connect” (Lyons 2003, p. 107). A meta-analysis of 225 studies found students were more likely to fail classes based on lectures as compared to active learning (Freeman et al, 2014). This should come as no surprise. After all, mansplaining is onanistic at its core: when a man explains to a woman who already knows better than he does, his motivation is less to teach, more to stroke his own ego.

Nel Noddings opens the fourth chapter of her book, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (1992), with the following passage:

“Suppose education had been planned and school systems constructed by people whose interests and responsibilities focused on the direct care of children, the elderly, ill, disabled, and otherwise dependent. Suppose education were planned by people primarily concerned with the kinds of relations we should establish. For the most part, these people have been women—and much that I recommend can be associated with a feminist perspective—but men, too, often initiate and share in an alternative vision.” (Noddings 1992, p. 44)

The “alternative vision” which Noddings proceeds to lay out is characteristically feminine, emphasizing attentive love and care across multiple modes: “care for self, care for intimate others, care for associates and distant others, for nonhuman life, for the human-made environment of objects and instruments, and for ideas” (Noddings 1992, p. 47). And while she does not say so explicitly, the status quo Noddings’ vision juxtaposes (or, at least, elements of it) can be seen as characteristically masculine. Importantly, Noddings makes a distinction between women and the feminine; and likewise, implicitly between men and the masculine—illustrated by the line from the passage above, “For the most part, these people have been women... but men, too....” However, she makes no mistake about the overbearing influence of men in traditional education. Later in the essay, Noddings writes: “One can only speculate on... how the curriculum would have been constructed if, for example, women rather than men had designed them” (Noddings 1992, p. 61). It is no accident, she implies, that transmissive pedagogy is the norm in an educational system founded and constructed almost exclusively by men.

This is not to say that transmissive pedagogy *must* be masculine, or that anything masculine is by definition oppressive in the Freirean sense. The teaching of care which Noddings recommends could easily be botched if transmitted in a superficial way. Much of the shortcomings of traditional education, then, are not due to their masculine nature, but rather the superficiality of its practices. For example, lectures, which I criticized earlier, may only be ineffective when poorly delivered. Daniel Schwartz, Jessica Tsang, and Kristen Blair launch a rousing defense of lectures in *The ABCs of How We Learn*:

People often refer to lecturing as the realization of a *transmission theory* of knowledge growth, where the instructor attempts to pour knowledge into the head of students.

Who really believes it is possible to pour ideas into a mind? We have not met anybody yet.... Some people think constructivism needs to involve learning through discovery and hands-on activities—they think lectures are antithetical to constructivism. This is not true. The problem with lectures is not that they are anticonstructivist; people can construct knowledge when sitting quietly, if they have sufficient prior knowledge.” (Schwartz et al 2015, p. 118)

Schwartz et al and others attempt to correct the inefficiencies of transmissive pedagogy by focusing on critical thinking as opposed to rote memorization. They argue that lectures can be constructivist if delivered at the right time, with the appropriate prior knowledge. Similarly, Jerome Bruner (1960) uses “structure” as the locus of his critique of transmissive pedagogy. He uses the example of observing that an inchworm prefers to travel uphill along an incline of 15 degrees. A student need not memorize this as “an isolated fact” (Bruner 1960, p. 7)—as traditional education might require—but should understand that organisms follow patterns of behavior. “Once a student grasps this basic relation between external stimulation and locomotor action,” Bruner writes, “he is well on his way toward being able to handle a good deal of seemingly new but, in fact, highly related information” (Bruner 1960, p. 7). Bruner does not directly reference the teaching practice of lectures, but his solution is reflective of Schwartz et al’s view that the transfer of knowledge from teacher to learner can be a good thing, if done in the right way, at the right time.

I am going to pivot here and talk for a moment about pronouns. Bruner’s example student is arbitrarily male: “*he* is well on *his* way....” This reflects the traditional grammatical canon of using masculine pronouns by default, even when the hypothetical subject is genderless. Bruner’s piece was written in 1960, and this grammatical tradition has apparently eroded since. Examples of the upending of gendered pronouns in academic writing can be found throughout the modern readings assigned in this course. Elliot Eisner’s 2002 essay, *The Kind of Schools We Need*, for example, uses both genders. In a passage distinguishing primary from secondary ignorance, he begins with the default male pronouns: “Primary ignorance refers to a condition in which an individual recognizes that he does not know something but also recognizes that, if he wanted to know, he could find out” (Eisner 2002, p. 578). Then, in the next paragraph, he switches to female: “When an individual suffers from secondary ignorance, not only does she not know something, but she does not know that she does not know” (Eisner 2002, p. 578).

And then there is Paolo Freire, who jumps from one pronoun to the other so frequently that it is impossible not to notice. At one time, a teacher is male: “he expounds on a subject completely alien to the existential experience of the students” (Freire 2005, p. 71); at another time, the teacher is female: “the more completely she fills the receptacles, the better teacher she is” (Freire 2005, p. 72); yet another time, the teacher is either: “the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority” (Freire 2005, p. 73). While Freire and Eisner incorporate both genders in their writing, many authors today simply reverse the default and use exclusively female pronouns. Given the persistent imbalance in gender

relationships today, I myself prefer this version, although I tend not to rely on indefinite pronouns as much as the likes of Freire.

The trajectory from all-male to mixed-use or all-female pronouns reflects a similar movement in regards to images used in textbooks. Unsurprisingly, in the 1970s and 80s, researchers found that the majority of people depicted in textbooks were male (Walford 1981, cited by Blickenstaff 2005). And while “progress has been made to eliminate sex bias in school textbooks” (Blickenstaff 2005, p. 378), the masculine nature of school pedagogy still persists in other ways. According to Christine Sleeter (1996), narratives told in schools reflect a predominantly white and male perspective. Sleeter argues instead for a “multicultural” education which tell multiple narratives—so many narratives, in fact, that the reader wonders if excluding the perspectives of deaf people in standard curricula is wrong. The narratives in Sleeter’s version of school reform are as disorienting to the traditional observer as Freire’s use of pronouns—and like Freire, her goal is not overthrow the patriarchy with another autocracy: “Such critical consciousness does *not* mean that we reject or disbelieve bounded narratives and look for the “correct” one—there is no correct one. That is the point” (Sleeter 1996, p. 99). If there is no correct narrative, which do we choose?

I consider myself a positivist, in that I believe that there are truths about the world which exist “out there,” independent of human perception (although we may never find them). My personal view departs from Sleeter’s when she seems to reject the idea of truth altogether. While there certainly can be no “one grand narrative,” some narratives are true and some narratives are false. Moreover, among multiple true narratives, some are better than others (Kuhn 1999). When Sleeter writes, “Nor is the dichotomy of science versus myth tenable... both modes of thought attempt to represent reality, but in very different ways” (Sleeter 1996, p. 100), she seems to accept Third World mythology as equally true as modern science. Howard Gardner does the same thing in *The Disciplined Mind*, comparing traditional Chinese medicine to Western medicine (Gardner 1999). This view is frustrating to me. While there may be some valuable elements of truth in ancient myths, we cannot unilaterally reject all the verifiable knowledge gained over the centuries simply because they are associated with the white male narrative.

If we accept that some things are truer than others, then we must accept the value of someone who knows something sharing that knowledge with someone who doesn’t. Traditional education may genuinely aim for this goal. Problems arise only when that sharing is ineffective, misguided, and/or unearned. When Solnit’s host lectured her about the book she herself had written, it wasn’t the sharing of knowledge that was offensive—it was his obliviousness and air of superiority. The fact that the two often happen to go together—the sharing of knowledge *and* oppressive, transmissive pedagogy—is why sharing knowledge can never be enough. We need to interrogate and criticize that knowledge also.

To the extent that I have looked at education through a gendered lens, I have implied that sharing knowledge is a masculine endeavor. The extent to which this has anything to do with

men and women I will leave for another day. Some feminist theorists believe that gender differences, like the true-false dichotomy in positivist science, are fabrications of society, and so any distinction between masculine and feminine is moot. Be that as it may. I am less concerned with the defining of social phenomena as gendered as I am with the balance between those phenomena which are interdependent. A healthy balance between knowledge sharing and generative learning is as imperative as the balance between the qualitative and quantitative, the masculine and the feminine.

In conclusion, I will return to Noddings' essay, *The Challenge to Care in Schools*:

In education today, there is great concern about women's participation in mathematics and science. Some researchers even refer to something called the "problem of women and mathematics." Women's lack of success or participation in fields long dominated by men is seen as a problem to be treated by educational means. But researchers do not seem to see a problem in men's lack of participation in nursing, elementary school teaching, or full-time parenting. Our society values activities traditionally associated with men above those traditionally associated with women. (Noddings 1992, p. 51)

I share the concern about the underrepresentation of women in science, but this concern seems tangential in light of Noddings' remark. The problem is not necessarily that science and mathematics are stereotypically male, or that caring is stereotypically female, but rather that science and math are valued more than care. Again, it's that air of superiority. I am fine with a man explaining something to a woman if it is helpful to her and she wants to hear it—a scenario which, in a just society, would probably happen from a woman to a man just as often. The same goes for lectures and a teacher sharing knowledge with a learner. But knowledge-sharing, like other traditionally masculine activities, is only one side of the equation. Fixing the shortcomings of the overbearing force in an interdependent relationship does not correct the balance. I fear that drawing talented women into science and math *without* drawing talented men into teaching, nursing and parenting at an equal rate will exacerbate the current state of inequality between the masculine and the feminine, even while it does the opposite between men and women. May we learn to value Noddings' centers of care at least as much as knowledge-sharing, lest we neglect the work of attentive love.

## REFERENCES

- Blickenstaff, J. C. (2005). Women and science careers: leaky pipeline or gender filter? *Gender and Education*, 17(4), 369–386. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250500145072>
- Bruner, J. (1960). *The Process of Education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. pp. 1-32, 43-54.

Eisner, E. W., & Bird, L. B. (1998). *The kind of schools we need: Personal essays*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Freeman, S., Eddy, S. L., McDonough, M., Smith, M. K., Okoroafor, N., Jordt, H., & Wenderoth, M. P. (2014). Active learning increases student performance in science, engineering, and mathematics. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *111*(23), 8410–8415. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1319030111>

Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum. pp. 71-86.

Gardner, H. (1999). *The Disciplined Mind*. New York: Penguin Books.

Kuhn, D. (2011). A developmental model of critical thinking. *Educational Researcher*, *28*(2), 16–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1177186>

Lyons, T. (2003). Decisions by science proficient Year 10 students about post-compulsory high school science enrolment: A sociocultural exploration. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of New England, Armidale, NSW, Australia.

Mansplain [Def. 1]. (n.d.). *Google Define Function*. Retrieved March 20, 2017, by googling “mansplain”

Noddings, N. (1992). *The Challenge to Care in Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press. Pp. 44-62.

Osborne, J., & Collins, S. (2001). Pupils' views of the role and value of the science curriculum: A focus group study. *International Journal of Science Education*, *23*(5), 441–467.

Rothman, L. (2012, November). A Cultural History of Mansplaining. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2012/11/a-cultural-history-of-mansplaining/264380/>

Schwartz, D. L., Tsang, J. M., & Blair, K. P. (2016). *The ABCs of how we learn: 26 scientifically proven approaches, how they work, and when to use them*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.

Sleeter, C. (1996). *Multicultural Education as Social Activism*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press. pp. 91- 115.

Solnit, R. (2014). *Men explain things to me*. New York: Haymarket Books.