

Teaching Styles Transcription
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Hi, this is Gary Rogowski for Splinters. Thank you very much for joining me. I'm happy to announce that Splinters is now partnering with Highland Woodworking.

Highlandwoodworking.com has been providing fine tools almost as long as I've been doing this work. Since 1978. That's about the time I designed my first good piece of furniture, but please check out their website at highlandwoodworking.com.

Today's topic is about teaching styles. Now, I just finished this book. It's a book by a guy named Joe Posnanski called "The Baseball 100". Basically, he lists his 100 top players and gives reasons why, but he's got great hooks. Each essay, they're only a few pages long. The Barry Bonds one is a lot longer, pro and con. But he has a hook for each and every baseball player that he talks about. And he talks about Honus Wagner, perhaps the greatest shortstop of all time, who was lightning fast and led the league in triples and stolen bases a couple of years. He won eight batting titles. He was a superstar in the 1890s to almost 1920 of the last century. He was also baseball smart, very generous to those about him.

And some years after he had retired, in the 1930s, he was asked to coach another shortstop for the Pittsburgh Pirates, who was a slugger but kind of error prone, and his name was Arky Vaughn. No one remembers Arky Vaughn, who is in the Hall of Fame. Anyway, Posnanski writes, "After a few days, someone asked Arky how it was going. "I'm not sure," Vaughn said, "when I asked Mr. Wagner what to do, he said, 'You just run in fast, grab the ball, and throw at the first base ahead of the runner.' But he didn't tell me how."

I remember when I first started woodworking, there was no one that I knew of in Portland who did the kind of fine woodworking that I wanted to do. There were cabinet shops, but I didn't want to build kitchen cabinets. I didn't want to learn how to do that. I didn't want people calling me up saying, "Hey, give me a kitchen. That wasn't for me."

And a friend of mine, Jim, had told me of a neighbor of his who was doing some woodworking. He had built some furniture, and I thought, "Here's my chance. This is it. Some real information now from a real woodworker. This is great."

So I went to this guy named Joe, and I asked him, "How could I become a furniture maker?" His terse reply spelled it all out for me. "You just do it," he said.

Of course. What advice. I just do it. Thanks a lot.

His advice did presage Nike's slogan by some 20 years, but woodworking relies less on natural athletic ability and more on patience, perseverance, lastly, and most importantly, forgiveness. But I took this Joe's advice and taught myself some methods, took me four years of self-teaching, which along with some wonderful British books, helped me to build furniture. Ernest Joyce, "Encyclopedia of Furniture Making", and the Charles Hayward books, "Woodworking Joints" and some others that were just instrumental for me. I had to learn somehow.

Self-taught folks, I think, are stubborn.

No. Well, I'm stubborn. And I walk with my own particular kind of limp in the shop. That's just how I am, how self-taught folks are, I think. You figure out a way, and that's the way it is.

These two stories do speak, however, to teaching styles. One can be extremely skilled in any field, but it doesn't make you a good teacher. Once I started teaching, I realized that it had nothing to do with woodworking. It was a completely different endeavor, and I had to teach myself how to become a good teacher. I had witnessed it, certainly. There were certain notable teachers in my past. Shout out to Eric Kleinman for the Shakespeare class. But over the years, I also learned about ways of teaching and types of students and different ways of learning. I have watched such frustration and shame. I had a student walk out of the shop one time because he had made a mistake, cut a board too short, I think. And he couldn't stand it. He just packed up all his tools, didn't say a word, and left. I said, "It's okay. We can fix it." It did not matter. Some folks cannot face their own simple lapses of judgment, not paying attention, getting distracted, or their own ignorance. And it's too bad. Some of these folks see failure as a statement about their own self-worth. And it's not about that.

Ignorance, I will always believe, is fixable. I can fix that. I can give you information. It's stupidity you can't outrun. And failures in the shop, failures anywhere, failures teach us far more than succeeding. It's hard to get used to that concept, but you try something at the bench and, oh, I just got tear-out. Well, I have to change my stance or the angle of my tool. That kind of, it's called feedback, is not failure, is a part of the game. And trust me, the more you do this work, the more failure becomes a familiar.

And, you know, even if you know something and haven't done it for months or years, you haven't done a particular operation. You come back to it and you're not that smart with it. It doesn't just roll right off your fingertips. So if you don't stay in practice, it's hard to get it. The learning curve is much shorter, less steep if you've done it before. But the first time back, you're not that swift.

So I think that there are a couple of things that students need to be aware of, particularly those students who have been successful somewhere else. And that is, you're going to suck at this at first. And that's all right. Everyone starts out at the beginning. Very few people walk into this with that knowledge in their hands already about how to hold a tool and what's dangerous and what's not, how to read a piece of wood.

There's a book in there.

And a teacher also has to give out information in a number of different ways, because not everyone learns the same way. Some need to see a technique demonstrated, or they need to try it once themselves, or they need to write notes about it and let it get inside their head. And then there are the filters that we each carry to a class or to the messages released in a class. And there are biases toward men or towards women or towards haircuts or towards any number of things. There are first impressions. And all sorts of stuff goes into that first five minutes of a new class.

My goal is simple. I'm trying to win the students over as quickly as I can. Get them to relax, see my style. It's not judgmental. And then we can dip our toes in and do some work. It will take some folks longer than others to get it. Some require more help. And that's the job of the teacher, looking to see who's getting it, who is faking it. There are those. And who needs help. And you'll get people who will come to a class, they're taking a class, but they walk around proving to everyone how smart they are about everything else. And it's, you know, you give people some rope on this, but I had this one guy in class who was walking around, it was a carving class that I was teaching, and he was walking around to everyone's bench commenting on everyone's work, which was totally unnecessary. And finally, he got around to my bench and pointed out to me that the carving tools were quite sharp and proceeded to poke

himself with his gouge. They were sharper than even he knew. I don't know about karma, but it was an interesting, interesting time.

At Highland Woodworking this past June, I had the great opportunity to teach a two day seminar on building a high angle plane. So a block plane, so it's bevel side up. That was great fun. 10 students hardened and tempered tool steel for a wooden body hand plane. And this high angle tool is suitable for planing the most difficult grains in a board. That's why I designed the class this way. To come up with a tool that people just don't have. It was a fun class. Good group. Lots of learning styles walked through that door.

I would tell this one student exactly what I wanted, and he would nod his head saying, "I got it." And then he would go off and do something entirely different. Well, that's my bad. You know, I can't watch everyone every minute, but I did need to watch him a bit more carefully, and I figured that out eventually, and his success rate started to increase. His opportunities, not failures, his opportunities made us come up with some interesting fixes for his creativity.

So, no mistakes in woodworking, only opportunities.

Anyway, Highland Woodworking and I are beginning a partnership in education. They've been dedicated to it for many years. Heck, I taught there 20 years ago. Sam Maloof before me, Tage Frid, lots of heavyweights. But it's a very interesting store. And we're going to work together on providing folks with quality tools, which is what they sell, and information, which is what I give. I've never done this before with any company because I never wanted to work with any company, but the folks at Highland are different. So is Chris Bagby's store. If you get a chance, go to Atlanta, the Highland District and check it out. It's a marvelous place. And check out the website at Highlandwoodworking.com.

Now, I want to finish by talking about some of the classes we've got coming up. It's fire season out here out west. So it's been hot as heck, and then it's been a challenge. So I'm looking forward to the fall and teaching folks again. We'll have two classes, one called Setting Up Shop. I ran that last year, and last year I did it on every other Saturday. This one, this year I'm going to start last week of September and run for 12 weeks, but every Saturday in a row. And folks will get a chance to come to office hours and ask me questions about anything, preferably about woodworking. It's a great opportunity for folks who are, you know, maybe just getting started and just setting up a shop.

Andy was doing that last year. But Gordy was, you know, pretty far down the line on setting up his shop. But there are things you can tune up and thinking about it differently and thinking about them in terms of your production in the shop, I think, is a big deal. It was revealing for folks on a lot of different levels. And we got a chance to make a project most every week that are projects that are useful in the shop, push sticks. We did a tool rack, a curved and laminated tool rack, and, you know, different stuff. It's nice to build stuff for your shop. I like it. I really do. But we kept the projects pretty simple. Anyway, it was a fun class.

Please check out our website, northwestwoodworking.com and check out the Online Mastery page there as well for some information on the Online Mastery Program. We will be entering our sixth season, my goodness. Wasn't COVID just last week? It is for some folks still, I'm sure. But that pandemic seems like it was yesterday. But a lot of time has gone by. The online method is interesting, but also effective. So I encourage you to reach out to me at northwestwoodworking.com and ask me questions and check out the work. There's some great stuff there. You'll discover that my teaching style mimics that of Father Perham, my Algebra teacher, Freshman year of high school, and then Geometry, and then what was it? Trigonometry and then Calculus. He was a great teacher, Father Perham as was Eric Kleinman at the

University of Illinois.

Thanks very much for joining me. I'm just babbling now. Thanks very much for joining me. This has been Splinters with Gary Rogowski and Highland Woodworking. Oh, and one final thing. I really want to offer to folks the opportunity to ask questions, and I'll respond to them in our podcast. So if you've got something on your mind, drop me a note, studio@northwestwoodworking.com all spelled out. Ask me your woodworking questions. I'd love to help you out.

Do good work. Thanks very much.