

Splinters Podcast

My First Student July 4, 2025

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<https://NorthwestWoodworking.com>

Hello. Welcome to Splinters. This is Gary Rogowski. Thank you for joining me. Today's chat is a bit of history, bit of my history. Before we get started on that, I want to mention our website, Northwestwoodworking.com and our classes on Setting Up Shop. Oh, in the distance, but January will be here soon. So we're going to have a 12 week class called Setting Up Shop. And our Online Mastery Program starts in October. So summer's off. Yes, lolly and gagging, lollygagging. We'll pick it up in the fall. So please check out the website, <https://northwestwoodworking.com>.

Thank you as well to our partner in education, <https://HighlandWoodworking.com>. Please check out their latest catalog, pretty interesting interview with Thomas Lee Nielsen of Lee Nielsen Toolworks. And check out their Wood Slicer. It's a great blade.

All right, today's chat is called My First Student. Like many craftspeople, I made a fortune early on and didn't know what to do with my time and all that money. It's a joke. I'm kidding, of course, the economy. Remember that? The economy makes puppets of us all. I had to work hard to stay solvent enough to lose only a little bit of money each month. In the beginning, I made cutting boards and plant stands and hand mirrors, sold them at craft fairs making these little items, brought in a little bit of cash. And after some years of this, I decided, you know, teaching might help my income stream a little bit. And there was a great place called the Multnomah Arts Center in Southwest Portland. And my very first woodworking class was held there.

It was in an old building, old three story building on the main drag there and their wood shop and all of its dust making sat down three flights of stairs in the basement of this place. Smart folks at the Multnomah Arts Center. And Douglas Janacek was one of three students enrolled in that first class of mine. Don't remember the names of the other two, but I do remember him. I remember Douglas. There's probably a certain Slavic influence of his name on me that no doubt helps, but he was also a pharmacist, like my favorite uncle had been. And he had a certain talent with his fingers. And that's what really made him stick in memory. Douglas, it turned out, had especially adept fingers.

In that class, we built a small box project, but joined together, but we need to pin that. And so we

drilled holes and then pinned the joints with dowels glued in to lock everything good and tight. And I had shown the students how to do this. The holes were drilled by moving the glue with a toothpick from the bottle to the hole with some speed, some alacrity. And then I'd smear the glue around and tap in the dowel pin.

What I never forgot was watching Douglas put on a good dab of yellow glue on his toothpick and holding up his workpiece and readying himself to apply the glue to the hole while I am by his side alert and there to help but as I watch him and this dollop of glue which I am certain he's going to lose to gravity's pull and watch it drop onto his shoes or the floor or his project with this drop now forming on the end of his toothpick and drooping and thinning at its neck and stretching out and about to fall and I'm viewing this with such interest when Douglas good Douglas the pharmacist by trade and by training the man with the adroit fingers to move around hundreds of little pills successfully Douglas simply rotates his toothpick bringing the blob of glue up to the top of it thus saving it from a fall and there it accumulates again and starts this wrestling match with gravity all over.

I don't even think he knew what he was doing so much as doing what he knew. This was a technique learned in the lab, and so he used it probably without thinking. But his application of this method to this new skill he was learning, woodworking, was inspiring. It was memorable. His cool under the fire of a glue-up was great to watch. His fingers rolling the toothpick astonished me. He was so cool. Glue-ups, I've heard, have been known to make people cry and scream and throw tools and things.

Not me, of course. I always have maintained my cool.

No, I'm kidding about that too. There are many things in the shop that can set my vocabulary into motion. But gluing is one that is especially adept at making me howl. So much effort, so much time, so much energy spent to get to this point. And I seem to have the well-honed ability to take a high placed perfection and turn it into a muddle of inaccuracies.

Now I can fix these setbacks. That's not a problem, and I have done so. And I am learning always to forgive myself for being human. Perfection is always out of reach for me, although I strive, I still strive for it. Oh, how I strive for it. But Douglas, in the end, helped me early on to understand several important qualities that one needs in the shop.

One is patience.

He had that in abundance. Take your time. And the other is practice. And we all need to work on that. And some of us, could be me, more than others. Practice is so important. Let me just point out the biggest obstacle in my shop is always me. And understanding this and learning to work with me instead of against me is important. I think sometimes you may think that I'm making this up, but I'm not. This is all quite real for me. I know that I'm the biggest obstacle in my shop space and dealing with my focus or my moods or my confidence. It's a constant. Let's just leave it at

that. It's a constant. It's not a battle. It's not a struggle. It's a constant.

That's just how it is. Some days you're on top of it. Some days you're under it. And knowing that that's how it works is important. What you're striving for, of course, is that naturalness, the not thinking part of doing your work. But the only way you get to that point is by practice and practice and practicing again.

So I went into the shop today and I said, okay, I've taken a couple of days off. Where's my head at? I'm cutting the five minute dovetail. But I am not rushing. Normally I try and go as quickly as I can. This time I took my time and I made a beautiful five minute dovetail. It helps get me centered. It helps me practice my sawing. But it's a practice that says to me, focus. You're here. Focus on what you're doing. And that helps me quite a bit.

Anyway, I'll never forget my first student, Douglas Janacek, if you're out there, Douglas, drop me a note. Those first few years teaching were quite interesting at the Multnomah Arts Center and the Western Forestry Center and Portland Community College. There are some strange places I tried to teach wood shop in, but all moving forward. And here we are. Thank you again to Highland Woodworking for your support in our efforts to bring woodworking education to the masses or, you know, a few folks at least. Please check out information on the website about the Setting Up Shop video series. It's been great. This will be our third version. It's lectures, video lectures, Q&A, and projects, as well as an office hour before class and access to the videos of class for a period of time after we finish up. But it's a 12-week series of videos. Great fun. Really is great fun and important. Really important.

I got a note from a guy just the other day about setting up, setting up his shop. And he asked me a few questions. And I'm going to try and answer them on the maybe one of the next podcasts, a Q&A podcast. But I just said, there are no simple answers to this.

The quick answer to him was he was interested in where does he put his bandsaw jointer, planer, drill press, table saw, you know where do all these things go and workbench in a 200 square foot shop? That's very difficult. So I said, the short answer is this. Set your bench and set your bandsaw. Don't move them. Everything else, you'll figure it out. Those are my monuments in my shop.

Anyway, we get into that in the Setting Up Shop series and really get into the concept of flow, which I think is very important. It's a topic that we talk about in the Online Mastery Program. Another group will start in October. So if you're interested, please drop me a note and I'll send you the prospectus. The OMP, as I refer to it, the online mastery program is now, we'll be starting our seventh group in October. Time flies, huh? And it's been so much fun. And there's so much still to talk about that the graduates and I are going to get together for another class this fall, OMP3, I call it. And this class will be a two-part class on seating pieces. One is a stool project that I've done for years. Very challenging piece, most complex piece that I do, but I love doing them.

And so I'll teach that to my students, and then they'll be designing a dining room chair. Great fun. Chair work is really one of the most loved projects. Again, very challenging, but in the mastery program, it's a good one. <https://Northwestwoodworking.com>. Thank you very much for listening. This has been Gary Rogowski for Splinters. Take care of yourselves. Adios.