

Learning remotely

8May2021

No, this is not going to be an opinion piece about our educational enterprise. Suffice to say that those of us who teach for a living are finding entirely new ways to engage, train, illuminate, enlighten in this time of physical distancing. Yes, some better than others but that's a discussion for another day.

I lit off my confuser today to discuss my own learning in the time of Covid. As I've shared in earlier posts, my plan for my retirement is to spend more time writing and working wood. In the latter arena, I'm nearing completion of my shop in the new house. In fact, if I get the utility bench mounted this weekend, everything else is smooth sailing.

I learned a lot about setting up a shop from the two years we lived in Puyallup. My back injury and tremorous hands have altered my range of capabilities and I built the Puyallup shop around those limitations. Or, to be more accurate, around my remaining abilities. It's not likely I'll be doing much volunteering with Habitat for Humanity in my golden years. House carpentry involves too many of the body motions that are no longer well-served by corpus meum. So, no more blitz builds on my horizon. And making cabinetry involves large boards and/or sheet goods, the manipulation of neither of which remains within my comfort zone. So sorry, HfH. My last set of kitchen and bath cabinets was just that, my last.

Don't worry; this is not headed into woe-is-me territory. There are lots of things I can do with wood that don't require me to work painfully or unsafely. For example, I've always wanted to learn to carve. My first adventure at age ten was somewhat successful but neither broad nor deep in scope. I tried some chip carving early in married life but the need to renovate our kitchen for a family of four meant setting that aside, as well. Then, there was Queenie's guest room, the dog run, etc. and I never got back to carving. I've also wanted to try my hand at turning but there was always a more pressing need that prevented me spending the money for a lathe and tools or taking the time to learn.

Fast forward to the present. We've moved to the house in which we intend to live out our days. The garage has ample room and my carpentry skills and the lessons I learned in setting up former shops (this will be my fourth) have served me well. I have a lathe – not an expensive one but possibly as much as I'll ever need – and a fantastic table saw for doing the drudge work accurately and safely. I'm pretty much set to explore my new adventure. But I had a lot of learning to do. Where does one go to find a tour guide?

Before Covid, I had taken a class at the local woodworkers' supply house in basic turning skills and with practice, started to learn. But the nuances of the craft – not just how to do this thing but how to do it more efficiently, safely, artistically – are best learned under the tutelage of a master. And for the time being, in-person classes and workshops are not on my agenda.

Enter the World Wide Web.

Pretty much everything I need to know is out there for my perusal, thanks to a community of experts who make their living through patronage and advertising on their how-to sites. I'm learning a craft and the masters are learning how to use the Internet to help me learn.

Sure, there are some drawbacks to this method of schooling. On-site, in-person training is almost by definition provided by experts, or at least folks with a high level of competence. After all, the woodworking club or store is not going to want their name associated with self-proclaimed-but-not-really-artisans and won't provide a forum for people who don't deliver. Not so with the online world, where any yahoo with a set of cheap chisels and a cell phone can make a video purporting to pass on the arcane secrets of our craft. One needs to be very careful in choosing mentors in this virtual world. But of course, that's the case with almost any pursuit.

The big drawback of learning a craft remotely is not finding great teachers I can watch and learn from. Those folks are relative easy to find. The big rub is that they can't recreate an in-shop situation that allows them to watch ME work and make suggestions and course corrections as needed. The online instructor can't tell if my shoulders are too tense or my grip too tight. For that, you really do need to be together. The bottom line is that an online offering can help me build good habits but can't help me much with eradicating my bad ones.

I hope soon to be able to attend a workshop or two. I'm sure I've developed some wrong ways of doing things that require correction. But for the most part, I have done a decent job of avoiding the schlock meisters and finding truly useful content to guide me in developing my skills.