

Heads and Hands

With practice and mistakes in mind, *Bill Ratcliffe* recommends learning to learn

During my years of continuous learning and of teaching others, I have made observations and have identifying traits that can hold back progress. I am not bad at this job, and I always aim to get better, but more importantly I want to enjoy what I do. The key point is you must first learn how to learn.

As I am a guitar player of sorts, many of my teaching analogies relate to learning a musical instrument. When teaching at my workshops I have tried to find ways to convey certain aspects of our craft, and mostly focus on the head rather than the hands. I work hard to be a better teacher; to find new ways to explain approaches with nuance to students, to help them improve. That is where the numerous phrases have developed so that students now quote them back at me.

I have found the most common challenge after learning the basics correctly is getting and then keeping your head in the game. This can help you take your skills on to another level. Woodworking takes concentration, particularly on larger more complex projects. A good mental approach will improve the quality and enjoyment of your woodwork.

You may or may not recognise some of the following points. You may not actually care as you just want fun and take it not too seriously, however I am yet to meet a woodworker who doesn't quickly become invested with improving the standard of their work. I have found these subjects have helped many new woodworkers progress more quickly as they help to build a solid foundation, but I have also seen them help more experienced workers get past learning plateaus and barriers.

Regular Students

I see some students at regular intervals and some progress faster than others. A few are not that driven to get better, they have limited time and just want to relax with a hobby, but most aim to improve fast and gain new skills. That is to a degree where the head leads the hands. Just like any sport or learning to play a musical instrument it takes time, dedication and practice. The common denominator of those who improve is well-structured practice and a thought-out approach to their work. To become a better guitarist, you must set up and tune the guitar well, practise scales, build dexterity and muscle memory; that is the equivalent of sharpening tools well and practising sawing and cutting joints accurately. Then you can move on to making items or playing full songs. Speed will follow accuracy but not the other way around.

I am often struck how people expect to become a good woodworker almost immediately, but they would never go for a piano lesson and expect to be in an orchestra the following week. You may recognise the scenario of having bought some great books, watched lots of YouTube videos and have invested in all



Bill Ratcliffe (left) warns students not to watch the clock at the end of the day, then dip for the tape (above) when they are physically and mentally tired. The result is that one often ends up falling on one's nose

sorts of tools and gizmos that guarantee to make them a better woodworker. So why aren't they getting any better? Have you practised regularly and well?

One morning you are keen to get back into the workshop to that project you are making in stages. You get straight into it and it does not go so well. Would a sports person start without a warm-up and practice? Would a musician not warm up and tune up? Get your head in the game first and practise the process you are about to do on some scrap wood.

A simple example is that I encourage beginners cutting a cross halving joint. Many people put relief cuts in the waste before chiselling out which is fine, but I see people do their two side cuts first and then just randomly put four angled relief saw cuts in. Why start with the most important cuts rather than use the relief ones as warm up? If you saw the relief cuts like they don't matter, you have just practised sawing badly four times and only practised with focus twice. Mark out some relief cut lines and cut to them, you will cut the critical ones more confidently and embed good muscle memory six times. This is one example of how the head can make you small gains.

Whistler's Mother

When we are making something that does not go to plan, and something is cut poorly, we immediately want to correct it. A mild panic sets in to undo the thing that is blighting our work. I cannot look at it, it offends thine eyes. We then go into panic mode and often we make it worse, for example when joints don't fit the mallet comes out, whack, whack, you will fit, result is often dents and splits. This mode also happens a lot with surface finishing, which can make or break a project. You might remember Mr Bean removing a mark from Whistler's Mother with hanky followed by thinners. Don't be Mr Bean, step back and take five minutes to



A well-organised workbench is critical for working with calm (above left). Don't try cleaning Whistler's Mother with a hanky and thinners (above)

let the anxiety subside. Then come up with a plan to deal with the issue. Knowing when to walk away is an invaluable skill.

Quite often this mode follows a challenging process. We have made a mistake, or, for example, the set of dovetails we have been crafting for hours will not fit. We fail to diagnose why and start removing material indiscriminately, the chisel gets faster as our patience ebbs away. Eventually the pieces fall together with gaps galore. We must resist that feeling of 'Whittling Mode' (with all respect to purposeful whittlers) and recognise when we are slipping into it, we must diagnose where adjustments need to be made, measure, use squares, mark with pencil and then gradually adjust and test. A phrase I use a lot when I see the chisel being wielded in a frenzy to make the bloody thing fit, is that "Every push of the chisel should be made with a purpose." I will ask questions like, "What are you trying to achieve?", "Where exactly are you looking to remove material from?" "What was each push of the chisel attempting to remove or achieve?" I ask these questions of myself as I work too.

Wonderwall Syndrome

Most aspiring guitar players have our own 'Wonderwall', our comfort blanket to revert to when we try and practise the more challenging piece that we really want to learn. We play some bum notes and then self-doubt sets in, we need to reassure ourselves that we can actually play, so we go back to the stock riffs and tunes. Maybe yours is Smoke on the Water or if you are a Wayne's World fan it is Stairway to

Heaven for you, 'Stairway Denied'. This applies to woodworking and making too. Makers master the skill of making stools, but they aspire to make cabinets and they try joints. The first ones are not great, so they revert straight back to the comfort zone of making more stools. This is a common reason why we do not progress. You must practise the new skill and stick with it; you can always play your Wonderwall every now and then as a treat.

A common trait I recognise is watching the clock and wanting to get to a milestone by the end of the day, like an athlete dipping for the tape. We work at a comfortable accurate pace, producing good work, then usually towards the end of the day, when most physically and mentally tired, we speed up and lose focus to get something completed. Do not dip for the line as it will often result in falling on one's face.

Finally, I am pleased to have signed off with Whistler's Mother, Wonderwall Syndrome and Whittling Mode. Enjoy your woodworking and avoid those bum notes.

To learn more about Bill's courses and work visit cravenconservation.co.uk or visit @cravenconservation on Instagram and YouTube.

Saving Traditions

Richard Arnold saves old joinery with new tools

Having worked as a traditional joiner for the last 40 odd years, I sometimes despair at the sorry state of my chosen craft. All is not lost so to speak, as in this modern-day of technology the Internet, I have been given a window into what is happening around the globe in the joinery trade and I now live in hope that not all is lost.

Over the last hundred odd years the joinery trade has changed out of all recognition. This is not just because of the onset of the use of machinery as opposed to handwork, but also the actual design of our joinery and buildings, and the materials we use. Taking all this into account, along with the capitalistic modern consumerist environment we all inhabit these days, I can't help but think a joiner from around 1800 would be appalled to see what passes for quality workmanship these days in the majority of modern workshops. I often ask myself if this really matters, or if the vast majority of the population actually cares one way or another. I think that there is something within everyone that can subconsciously affect us when we are exposed to quality work.

Here in the UK, we are blessed with so many wonderful examples of vernacular, and historic architecture, and its maintenance and preservation will hopefully always ensure we need a core of well-trained tradespeople to undertake this work, and I am delighted to say that by the looks of what I see, this aspect of traditional joinery seems to be in good health, but what about our everyday older domestic and commercial properties that maybe have no protection, or listed status? Do they also deserve our attention? The very street I live on is a prime example.

It is a road of about 100 brick-built terraced houses dating from about 1880. Of those houses, only one has retained its original front door, and only four have their traditional vertical sliding sash windows. All the replaced joinery is of poor quality, and mostly plastic, and to my mind, the very soul has been ripped out of these dwellings' front elevations.

Some friends of ours who live up the street asked if I could replace their ugly plastic windows and reinstate some original style windows. I was more than willing to have the chance to put things back to how it would have been, and they were delighted with the results. The windows were made with machinery, and modern materials, but still using traditional construction techniques, style, and proportions that have evolved over the last 300 or so years. It's an uphill struggle, but the fight is on. One door, one window at a time.

To learn more about Richard's tools and techniques visit richardarnold.co.uk or follow @richard_arnold.



Sliding sashes in original timber tend to be replaced with plastic these days, but here Richard has made them in traditional styles, now using Accoya instead of tropical hardwoods, and modern essential machinery