

Seven lessons for the aspiring furniture maker

BY MONICA RAYMOND

In 1985, I announced to friends and family that I was dropping out of college to build a house. I was surprised when several people asked, “What makes you think you can build a house?” It had never occurred to me that I couldn’t. My reply was, “People build houses. I’m a person; therefore I can build a house.”

Completing that house took many years and plenty of blood, sweat, and tears, but is my proudest accomplishment. And now that experience is bearing fruit as I pursue another passion: making furniture.

If you dream of building furniture but don’t know where to begin, or if you are not progressing as fast as you’d like, read on. I won’t tell you how to make furniture, but I do have some advice about how to learn. I’ve already shared Lesson No. 1: Believe in yourself.

Lesson 2: Take a class

I thought that my carpentry skills qualified me to build furniture, and so I made a few tables and cabinets over the

years, but nothing ever came out very well. I was about to give up entirely when I wondered if my feeble skill level was due to a lack of training rather than some personal defect. A few months later, I took a two-week basic fine woodworking class and my skills took a quantum leap.

Don’t struggle for years like I did before taking a class! Woodworking books are very useful, but if a picture is worth a thousand words, seeing a live woodworking demonstration is worth a million. And when the demo is followed by hands-on practice and feedback, it’s priceless. In a class, you learn specific techniques for every part of the furniture-

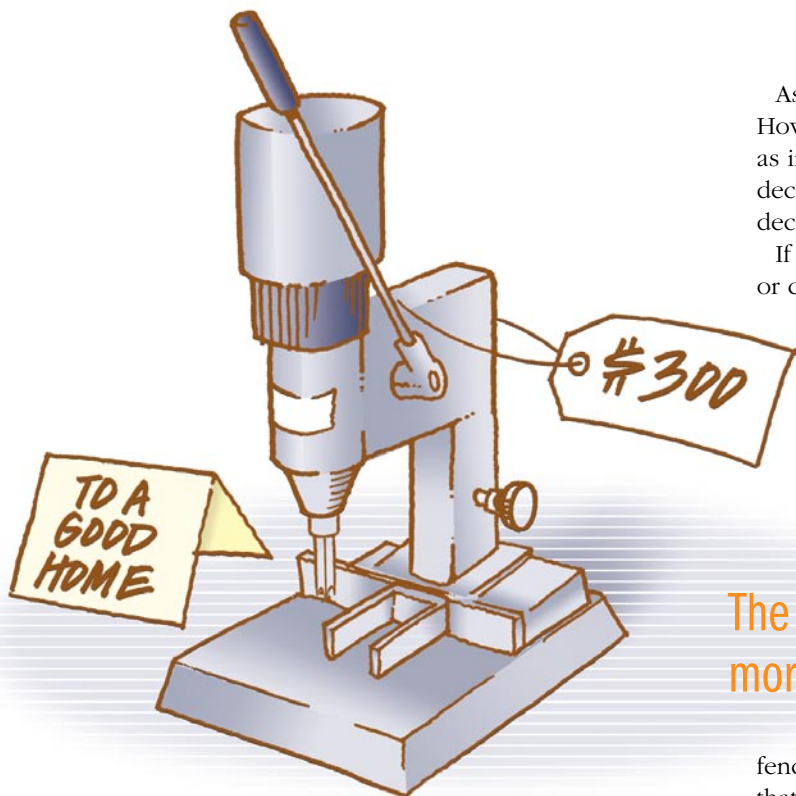
making process. If at first you don’t succeed, the instructor can diagnose and correct your mistakes. Even when you make a blunder that seems irreparable, the teacher usually knows a way to fix it.

The technique I was most excited to learn in my first class was dovetails. So, my first project after the course was a blanket chest with 40 hand-cut dovetails. I now knew that starting with perfectly flat boards was essential, but there were still some gaps in my knowledge. While I had learned how to flatten and square a single board, my jointing skills were not great and my handplaning skills (actually, my sharpening skills) were poor. I got around this by using a friend’s drum sander to flatten the wide glue-ups. But unlike my first woodworking experiences, which left me frustrated and demoralized, these failures simply motivated me to enhance my skills. Having attended a class made me realize that I *could* improve, and I knew how to make it happen.

3. Find woodworking friends and mentors

Other than taking a class, one of the best decisions I made was to join the Guild of New Hampshire





Ask other woodworkers what they use and why. However, don't take their answers as directives, but as information to use in making your own unhurried decision. Consider your own style of woodworking in deciding what is most important to *you*.

If you already have machines made for the hobbyist or carpenter (or can buy them cheaply at yard sales), use them to make furniture for a while. The experience will teach you which features are most important to you and help you make a more informed decision when you upgrade. For example, when using my old jointer for making furniture, I quickly discovered its limitations: at 6 in. it was not wide enough, and it had a sloppy

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Woodworkers. This all-volunteer organization has been my greatest source of support, not to mention pure enjoyment. The Guild holds a variety of meetings, mostly mini-courses on a plethora of topics. I always take fellow woodworkers up on offers to visit their shops. Not only do I learn a lot with every visit, but I also have acquired a cadre of mentors and friends who generously help me and advise me.

For instance, when my friend Jon Siegel learned I was selling my hollow-chisel mortiser because it didn't work well, he offered to help diagnose the problem. He determined that my bits needed reshaping, which he did for me in his own shop. When he visited my shop to return the bits, he spent hours showing me how to better tune and maintain the mortiser. We also discussed the qualities of the cherry I had gotten for my next project. He taught me about sharpening with sanding belts vs. stones, and showed me how to tune the guides on my bandsaw.

There are a number of ways to find woodworking friends. Woodworking-supply stores often hold events and classes, which are good places to meet people. You can also find folks by taking a class at a nearby woodworking school that caters to locals. Perhaps the best thing to do is join a club or guild and attend as many events as you can. The more involved you get, the more you will learn.

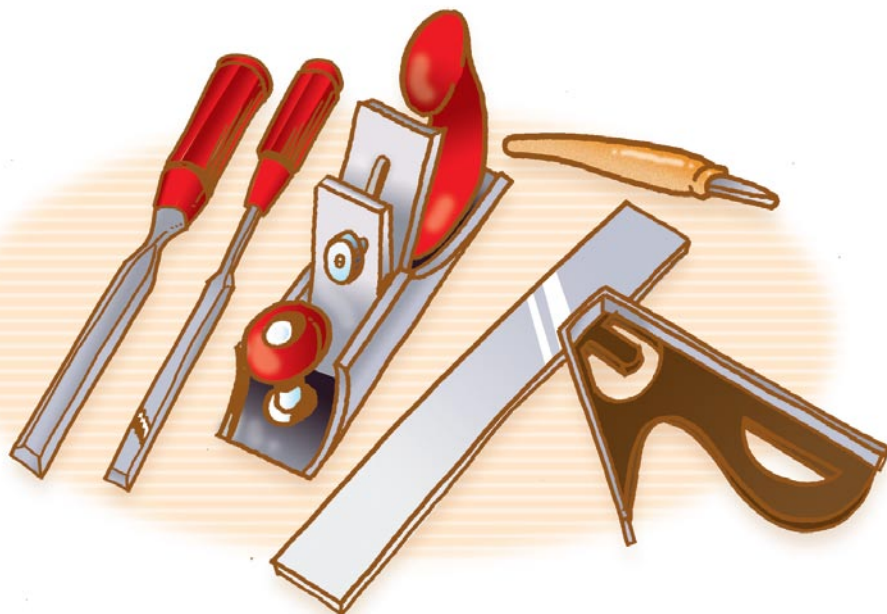
4. Stick with your old machines for a while

One of the greatest challenges facing a new woodworker is deciding what tools and machines to get.

fence that was impossible to adjust finely and tables that were too short and not coplanar. Other than moving up in size, my main considerations when replacing it were getting a brand known for precision manufacturing and a model with a fence adjusted by a handwheel.

5. Get good hand tools right away

When it comes to acquiring hand tools, my strategy is different. These tools are used for the most critical tasks: measuring, marking, cutting joinery, and eliminating machine marks, among other things. These tasks play a greater role in the quality of the final product than almost anything you do with a machine. Therefore, they



must be effective and accurate. If your square is not square, it is useless. During my first woodworking class, I tried marking the shoulders of a tenon with my old carpenter's combination square and found the lines didn't meet. I realized it was impossible to make a tight-fitting joint without an accurate square. Although I was stunned by the cost of top-of-the-line squares, I bought a 12-in. one and a 4-in. one, and now I can't imagine getting along without them.

The good news is that handplanes, another shop staple, are relatively easy to get inexpensively if you buy them used. There are a few older brands such as Stanley Bailey and Bedrock that are of much better quality than new planes of similar price, though you'll probably need to spend time tuning them up (see "Make a Bargain-Basement Plane Perform Like Royalty," *FWW* #217). It's also a good idea to buy quality replacement blades. On the other hand, if you have more money than time, buy top-of-the-line new handplanes.

6. Practice, practice

Once you've gotten various hand tools, taken a class, and established a set of woodworking friends, how do you go about actually improving your skills? Practice, practice, practice.

Although it's probably ideal to do exercises such as jointing a hundred boards or doing a hundred dovetails in a row, I prefer to practice while working on a project. For example, before I do a piece with dovetails, I practice dovetails on scrap lumber until I get them right. Later, if I'm not satisfied with how it's going, I might put the piece aside and spend an hour or more refining my technique.

It's also important to eliminate distractions and pay attention. For years I was not able to cut a straight line with a dovetail saw. Finally, I analyzed my technique and realized that my wrist twisted to the right at the end of each push stroke. I have to concentrate to correct this. If I find myself straying, I pick up some scrap and do 10 or 20 practice cuts.

It helps to make a piece that involves several repetitions of a skill you want to improve. If your

project only includes one drawer, for example, you won't get an immediate chance to make the second drawer better than the first. By the time you make another piece with a drawer, you might have forgotten what you wanted to do differently. Frequent repetition—whether in practice or on a piece—is an excellent way to learn. Eventually, as you develop your eye and your muscle memory, you will be able to retain your skills longer and need fewer practice sessions.

7. Rely on your own experience

My final recommendation: Don't blindly follow anyone's advice, mine included. Seek and listen to advice, but just put each bit "in the hopper" with all the other contradictory opinions. Experiment with the ideas that resonate most with you. In the end, take everything you've read and all the viewpoints you've heard, evaluate them through the filter of your own experience, and distill the formula that works best for you. □

Monica Raymond makes furniture in her home shop in Alexandria, N.H.



The lessons, applied. This white oak side table reflects Raymond's growth as a woodworker through formal coursework, informal help from friends, and her own practice.