

## Alan Leland's Tips and Thoughts on Teaching Woodturning

### Introduction:

In the following handout I will try to share my thoughts and some of the methods and anything else that I can think of that will help someone who is embarking on the rewarding journey of sharing his love of woodturning and his skills with folks eager to learn how to turn. Much of what has aided me in teaching new turners has been accumulated through learning and borrowing techniques, ideas and different ways to explain the body and tool movements used in turning from many of the workshops and Symposiums that I have attended . The knowledge I pick up from watching demonstrations and by taking workshops with skilled turners who also happen to be excellent instructors is invaluable. It is through my search for better ways of describing how the tools are used and why they have come to be used in certain ways that helps me to provide the students with a better understanding of the tools, techniques and skills involved in woodturning. It is this learning a variety of methods to present the information that makes it easier for me to help students better understand the how and the why tools are used the way they are used. It is this sharing of understanding of tool use that makes a big difference in the long run. The trouble is that, at first, the beginning students are too often presented with way more information than most folks can take in and retain. The idea is to present this information in a manner that is not too overwhelming and that will, at some point in the learning process, pop up in their minds as the light bulbs of understanding begin to light up. The biggest complaint I get in some of my evaluations is that there is too much information. I find this a very valid observation, but at first it is hard not to overload students new to turning with too much information.

The number one requirement to be a good instructor is patience. If you do not possess a lot of patience maybe you should consider helping spread your love of woodturning in other ways. New turners can be very frustrating as some learn new skills quickly and others it seems no matter how you describe something or help them work through a technique they just can't grasp the skill or idea. You need to be willing to repeat yourself and to describe techniques in different ways hoping that one of the methods will get through to the student. That is why having a written handout can be so helpful. I had a father and son in one of my week long classes and on the first day they were not having any success and they just could not understand how to use the tools. They were about to quit the class but I convinced them to stay and give me a chance to find a way to explain things so that they might understand how to use the tools. Funny thing the next day I walked by them while they were turning and noticed that they had somehow figured out how to turn. When I asked them what had made the difference in their understanding of the turning process, their response was that they had read my handouts on how to turn a bead and cove stick and the handout on spindle gouge skills and techniques and it all began to make sense to them. I mention this incident to emphasize that we all learn differently, some by reading others by watching and still others by hands on activities. The more ways you can show or explain a

skill or technique the more likely you will be able to get your ideas across to most everyone. Be careful here for, by providing too much information too quickly or by using too many methods or descriptions to demonstrate or explain a skill or technique, you may run the risk of overloading or confusing the students. This brings up another very important teaching skill, that of being able to read your students. As a teacher it is very helpful to sense when your students are confused due to misunderstanding the instructions, or from being overly tired or just plain information overloaded. There are those occasions when teaching older students that health problems may interfere with a student's ability to have success at the lathe. This can be a sticky wicket as you may or may not be aware of his health problem so assume that he has not grasped the concept due to a lack of understanding which can be very frustrating for you and the student. I had a student that when I looked in his eyes, I felt that he understood what I was saying but his hands and body did not respond as though he understood what I asked him to do. I was tempted to ask about any physical problems but did not want to embarrass the student as he was an older gentleman. Luckily for me he informed me that after a couple of hours standing due to injuries from his working life that he lost feeling in his hands. My suggestion to him was to take breaks when things got too frustrating and to take his time and not push his body to hard. He made it through the week and did manage to turn some nice projects. My point here is that as an instructor you have to be aware of your student's state of mind and be conscious of his frustration level and this comprehension of what he is learning. Remember, not all students learn at the same rate. I generally move on to the next step when 3/4 of the students are ready to move on.

The best instructors are not teaching to feed their egos, they are in it to share their love and joy of turning with others. Students already see you as somewhat of an expert so there is no need to show off or talk down to the student's, as such an attitude will only detract from the learning process. It is better to share your skills on an equal level with your students, after all there is no telling what your student's have accomplished in life and they are in class to learn not to made to feel inadequate or inferior. Also, be open to ideas and feedback from your students and be prepared to adjust the class according to your student's needs provided that their needs do not interfere with other students' enjoyment of the class.

One major thing to consider as suggested by Frank Penta is to decide what your purpose/goal is in teaching the class. For instance, are you just trying to get folks interested in turning, having fun and having instant success at the lathe or are you trying to teach the skills and techniques required to have a good understanding of the how and why the tools work the way they do. Thus sending the students on the path to being good possibly great turners. If you are just interested in getting the students to walk away with a completed turning, then teaching them how to scrape would be a quick and easy way to help them have a good time and instant success at the lathe. But if you are more interested in aiding them in understanding how to use cutting tools such as gouges and skewers to create fine turnings that require less sanding than items that have been produced using scrapers. Then your approach to teaching should be more methodical and a good solid curriculum should be developed to aid in passing on the how and why turning tools are used a certain way and ground differently for various types of turnings, with the emphasis on developing turning skills. The curriculum should be well thought out and preferably proceed one tool at a time. With the goal to teach the students how to use the tool followed by

the why and how a tool might be sharpened differently for different turning projects. Unfortunately I have found that most beginning students are more concerned with making a certain finished product rather dedicating a large amount of time just learning how to use a tool. So many of my students come to me with a list of projects that they want to turn and expect to turn them perfectly right out of the gate. They do not seem to realize that it takes a lot of practice and skill development with good feed back, to learn the skills and techniques to become a good turner. Although I have had a couple of very talented students in the past that picked up the skills rather quickly and produced really nice turnings as though they had been turning for years.

Personally I think that a good curriculum should start with the basics and move on one tool at a time. First by showing the students how to use the tool by going through a series of practice exercises just wasting wood away practicing how to use the tool. Then showing them how the tool is sharpened and explaining why it is sharpened the way you showed them and perhaps explain how it might be sharpened differently for different turnings. If there is time it would be good idea to teach the students how to turn a project that emphasizes the skills being taught. The intent of my lab manual titled "*Let's Go For A Spin*" is to teach a week long class spending a day working with and gaining an understanding of how to use one tool at time before proceeding to the next tool and the next exercise. Each session starts with building the students skills and moving on to turning a variety of projects depending upon skill level that relate to the skill be taught. The manual would be a good place to start for anyone interested in teaching woodturning.

### **Procedures:**

First things first. The number one thing that should be emphasized in teaching woodturning is safety. Safety should be the number one priority all through the teaching process. The first rule is to wear your face shield, as it is your best protection from flying objects. So many of us get complacent and do not wear our face shields as often as we should. Many a bowl has exploded in the final sanding process due to heat stress build up or unseen stresses in the wood.

*\*Note: I like to set up the demonstrators lathe sideways to the the audience so that they can see how I position my body and how I present the tools to the work on the lathe, especially if there is not a camera available to aid in seeing the work in progress. It is also a great safety factor in that anything that may fly off the lathe will not fly out into the audience.*

I have attached my set of safety rules along with a handout Craft Supply's has given me permission to use in my handouts. I also recommend reading the safety rules available through the American Association of Woodturners. I think that it is on their web site [www.woodturner.org](http://www.woodturner.org). It would be nice if there is time to let the students have a chance to read through the safety rules before starting the class. Too often class has to start before the students

have a chance to read the handouts. While I am setting up for class I give the early arrivals the handouts to read while they wait for the other students to arrive and for me to finish setting up. In any case, a brief review of the more important safety issues should be presented at the beginning of class. I also like to point out to my students that if they think or feel that something is unsafe, they should feel free to point it out. That feeling may be their intuition kicking in warning them that something is not right or it may be just their fear of trying something new or their lack of understanding of what they are about to do.

I feel that the most beneficial classes are those that are well thought out by the instructor. Writing and providing handouts is an excellent way to provide structure to the class. One of my mentors goes so far as to write on the board the rough timing of each step. Not in actual minutes but say, if doing a class on boxes, that the bottoms should be done before lunch and the tops will be turned after lunch. I try to give the students some idea or a verbal outline of how the day or the class will proceed. For instance when I teach "Session 1" from my manual "*Let's Go for a Spin*", in the morning the class works on turning a cylinder and turning beads, then after lunch they spend 20 to 30 minutes turning beads, then they learn how to turn coves and after which the class moves on to turn a simple project. If teaching young people this process needs to be sped up a lot. I take a bit longer working on beads than on coves as beads require more body movement and then there is the fact that I am a skills and techniques instructor and I try to work on building an understanding of how the tools work. I have to keep telling myself that I am not training folks to be professional turners but am teaching them how to make their turning easier and more enjoyable.

As the class is moving along stop occasionally and ask the class how things are going and if they are enjoying the class. Feedback is good for the student as well as the instructor. After every class I try to take the time to evaluate the class and look for ways to improve my teaching. It is also a good idea to provide evaluation sheets to give students an opportunity to critique the class. Sometimes these evaluations can be very helpful in providing good feedback that helps the instructor in future classes.

Try to avoid the pitfall of demonstrating a project from start to finish before letting the students get to work. It is best to break a project down into short steps and demonstrate each step when the majority of the class is ready to move on. I had a visiting demonstrator/instructor teaching a club sponsored hands on class in my studio not only demonstrate nonstop how to turn a regular bowl but then proceeded to demonstrate how to turn a natural edge bowl before letting the students loose to turn the projects. Needless to say, most of the students were confused as to how to start and turn the regular bowl, which was to be the first project. It would have been far more beneficial to have demonstrated how to turn the outside of the regular bowl complete with a foot for mounting in the chuck.

**Below I have listed some of the most important things to consider if you are planning to teach woodturning.**

1. A good teacher must have patience.
2. A good teacher is also blessed with the ability to break projects or instructions down into easy to follow steps and can explain things using a variety of teaching methods.

3. The best instructors are capable of clearly demonstrating the skills or techniques that are being taught. They also develop good handouts and possess good verbal communication skills.

4. Another good trait is to have the type of personality that can deal with and put up with a variety of student personality types. For instance, there are the over achiever who is ready to be finished with the project before anyone else even gets started and those who do not take the time to listen to the instructor or to learn the skills being taught. Then there are the perfectionist who will not start until he understands every little detail and nuance and the needy student who needs to have the instructor's full attention at all times even though there is a classroom full of students. Then there is the student that seems to already know it all and tries to take over the class. You get the picture.

5. If teaching multiple students you must be able to choreograph the process and keep the pace of the instruction moving so as not to bore anyone and to be able to finish the project in the time allotted for the class. You do not want to leave anyone behind and yet you do not want to hold anyone back. Bear in mind that students learn at different rates yet somehow they all seem to finish the project at close to the same time.

6. Be aware of the fact that for the most part we are not teaching students to be professional but are providing them with the skills to enjoy a very rewarding hobby that can pay for itself if one chooses to sell their work.

7. A good instructor has the ability to recognize a student's confusion or lack of understanding and has the ability to remedy the situation without embarrassing or making the student feel inadequate.

8. A good instructor is able to give positive constructive feedback and gives constant encouragement to his students.

9. Instructors need to be up to date on all the safety rules for the equipment they are using in the classroom and must at all times practice and emphasize safe woodworking techniques at all times in the classroom.

10. Remember to get constant feedback from the students as to whether they are having a good time and enjoying the class.

11. Most importantly, the classes and classroom experience must be a fun and enjoyable experience for all of the students.

12. Make sure that all the equipment that you will need to properly teach the class is available and in proper working condition. It helps to make a list of the tools and equipment that you generally use to make the project in your shop.

13. If someone else is preparing the materials for the class make sure that they have a clear understanding of the sizes, quantities and the quality of the required materials so that there will be no surprises once class begins.

14. My preferred class size is 3 students. I can get around to everyone just enough and still leave them time to process what is being taught on their own. One on one is my least favorite as I am looking over the student's shoulder all the time and most people feel uncomfortable if being watched all the time. Also with three students they get the benefit of the questions and mistakes that the other students make and ask, thus giving the students a better and more rounded experience.

15. When I teach at the local woodworking stores I limit the class size to 5 or 6 students for economic reasons. More than 5 or 6 students requires an assistant.

16. Sometimes adult students will come to class with a specific agenda, but I feel it is better if all my students start off turning between center working on a bead & cove stick followed by a simple project.

17. Before teaching anyone for the first time, I like them to turn a practice block. I have them waste away a block of wood by turning it to a cylinder and making a few facing cuts on the end followed by a few convex cuts (beads), followed by a few concave cuts (coves) and then finally combining the concave & convex cuts to form a nicely following ogee.

18. Class size at many Craft & Woodworking schools are anywhere from 10 to 17 students. Way too many for a hands on type instructor but they usually have an assistant for every 5 students. At The John C. Campbell Folk School an instructor can have an assistant after 8 students have signed up for the class. At John C. Campbell the woodturning classes are limited to 10 students so as a hands on instructor my hope is that only 8 students sign for maximum learning, but my ego likes it when there is a waiting list.

### **Conclusions:**

I have tried to provide some of the tips and things to think about before one goes off to teach woodturning for the first time or to help those that have already been teaching to aid in making the classroom experience more pleasant. I have shared some of the things that I feel make a teacher stand out. This handout was designed to be a starting point for a discussion on good teaching techniques and by no means attempts to cover all aspects of teaching. My intent was to provide some food for thought and to help those that have never taught before feel a tad more comfortable when going into a classroom. There is nothing more important than prior planning before the class begins. I have found that it takes close to two hours of preparation and planning time for every hour of classroom time and sometimes more. Once I have taught a class several times the planning time shrinks but never as much as I had would hope.

A final thought that one of my many mentors passed on to me is that the more you write, teach or speak in public the easier it gets. I have found this comment by my mentor Roger Austin to be very accurate and it has helped me push myself further than I ever thought I could go when sharing my skills. Another thought I would like to share is that if you or a student are getting frustrated it is time to stop and take a break and come back to what you were working on with a refreshed mind, body and most importantly, a refreshed attitude. Frustration tends to hinder the learning process by feeding upon itself and building its' own destructive energy. I have asked many a student to walk away from the lathe and get some fresh air. Good luck and happy turning!

My friend and one of my mentors Frank Penta has been very helpful in critiquing my handouts and my teaching skills. In Frank's and my early days of teaching we were a great teaching team. One class he would be the lead instructor and the next class I would be the lead

instructor. We worked well together. The students Frank and I, all learned a lot and the laughter was non stop making for a fun learning experience.

I would also like to thank the Wilmington Area Woodturners Association for inviting me to work with a group of club members to aid them in preparing to teach. The seminar was designed to help them become more comfortable setting up classes and teaching the classes with more confidence and with adequate preparation. This handout was created specifically for that workshop in order to share my thoughts on teaching and how I go about preparing for and teaching a class. Some of the tips that I have added to this handout are the result of that meeting and the sharing of thoughts and concerns that were discussed. It was an unusual experience, for I am used to having a lathe and turning tools in front of me when interacting with a group of woodturners. One of the things that made the workshop successful was the willingness of the members to share their thoughts and to actively participate in the discussion.

**Related Materials:**

*Woodturning A Foundation Course* by Keith Rowley  
*Woodturning Notes* by Allan Batty  
*Woodturning* by Michael O'Donell  
*Let's Go For A Spin* by Alan Leland