

## Learning Curve Blues

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I believe most woodworkers are familiar with the concept of the learning curve – the relationship between efficiency and experience – i.e. the more you do something the better (or faster) you get at it. In my mind, efficiency gains are the combination of doing the exact same thing over again and the innovation that comes when you think of a “better” way to do it. My theory: there are micro and macro domains to the woodworking learning curve.

The micro experience is related to doing something simple. When drilling a lot of holes you might find that a foot switch for the drill or router makes the job go faster or improves safety, holding the drill differently adds comfort or speed, or adding a mechanical stop block enhances consistency. Some workers are “better” at using a machine or a tool because they have implemented these “enhancements.” They are down the learning curve. Others are good at the task because they are either talented or very experienced or both. Did you ever see a video of Sam Maloof on a bandsaw?

The macro learning curve is related to repeatedly building the same object. I built a Stickly-inspired plant stand for my living room a while back, then my wife wanted a second one a bit taller; and later my daughter asked for a matching set, and lastly, I needed a gift for a close friend who was an indoor plant enthusiast. As you would imagine, each time I built the plant stand I thought of a way I could do it just a little better “next time.” Dowels replaced mortises; jigs allowed me to place the holes accurately and quickly, sanding the curved piece edges instead of flush trim routing eliminated the tear out I was struggling with, filling dowel holes with saran wrap allowed me to finish the parts before assembly, and so on. I went down the plant stand learning curve and eventually transferred some of the knowledge to other projects.

The problem for me is that I almost never build the same thing a second time. I build something I need or that a family member wants; I’m not in the business of making multiple gizmos to sell. So my opportunity for a “macro” learning curve experience is very limited.

Building the same project over and over again is great for the learning curve, but not so great for the boredom factor. What could be more mind-numbing than doing the same thing over and over. Once I’ve built something, I typically don’t have the urge to build another one. And if I do have the urge, I generally lie down till the urge passes.