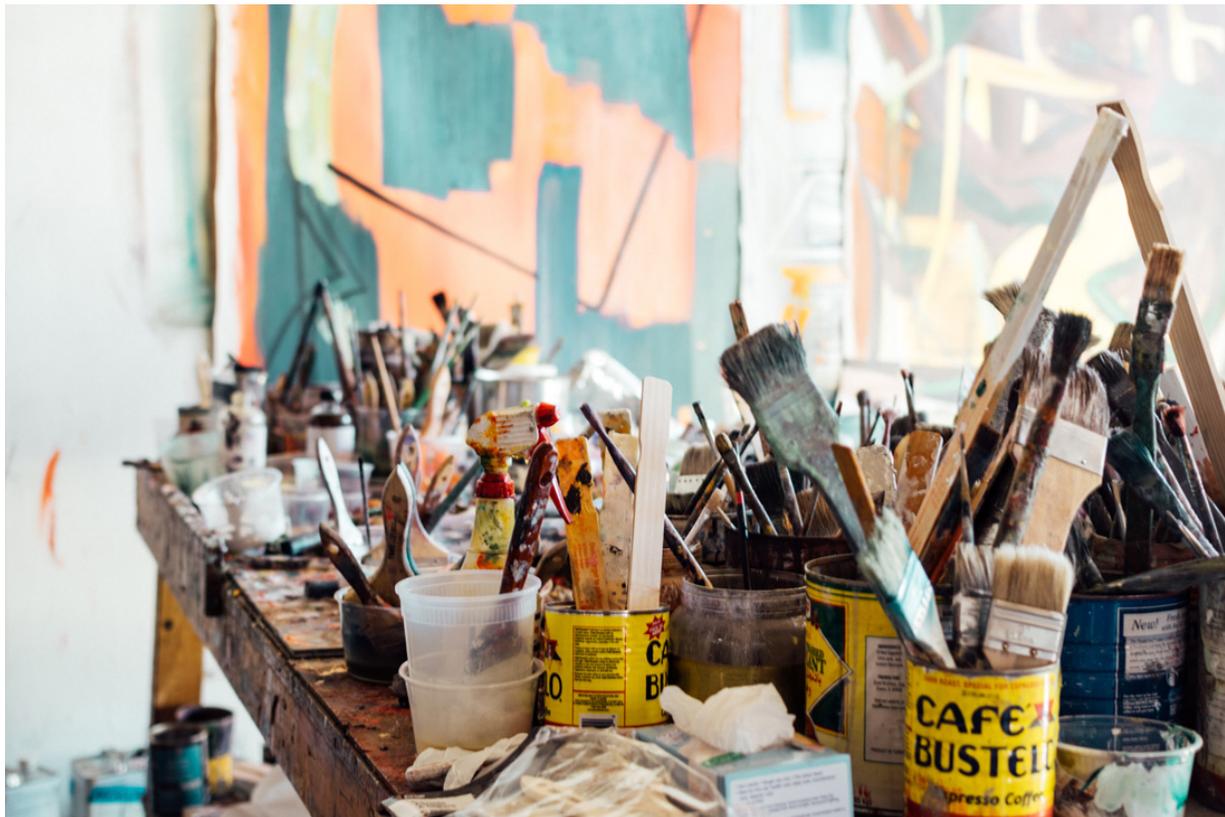




Best Practices for Vetting Craft Instructors

By Joanne Cleaver

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The old cliché that “those who can do and those who can’t teach” doesn’t reflect the realities facing craft instructors today.

Makers aspire to teach for a wide variety of reasons: they want to build a following for their online presence, they are testing content for blogs and books, they want to grow professionally, they want to sell tools and supplies, and they want to better understand the craft by seeing it through the eyes of beginners.

And teachers have their own reasons: many also aspire to build followings to expand their blogs, brands and books; they want to continually evolve their teaching skills; they are energized by learners; they love to explore shops, areas, and creative settings.

But in the absence of a national platform for assessing craft teachers and class experience, show owners and event organizers are on their own for vetting instructors. Some best practices are emerging, especially as students' expectations rise and professional teachers raise standards.

Sally Manke, a fiber artist and quilter based in Arcadia, Michigan, was a home economics teacher for decades before transitioning to self-employment. Classes are integral to her ambition to build a following, she says. And while her work sells steadily through her Etsy shop and she has won national quilting awards, Manke's primary identity is "as a lifelong learner," she says.

Even with formal teaching credentials, she is building her reputation as a creative instructor one guild and one shop at a time. It's only by testing her designs and processes with small groups that Manke gains insights that refine her instructions, kits, and class format.

And Manke counts on her professional credentials to differentiate herself from aspiring teachers.

"Just because you've won awards doesn't mean
you can teach," she says. "You can't be an
incredible teacher unless you know the topic
inside and out."

Erin Swietlik, director of category management for Craftsy, says that the most basic qualification for a teacher is often the most overlooked. "Can the teacher talk through a process in a logical, intentional manner? It seems obvious, but we get caught up in someone's design capability or creative presence and we don't truly vet," she says.

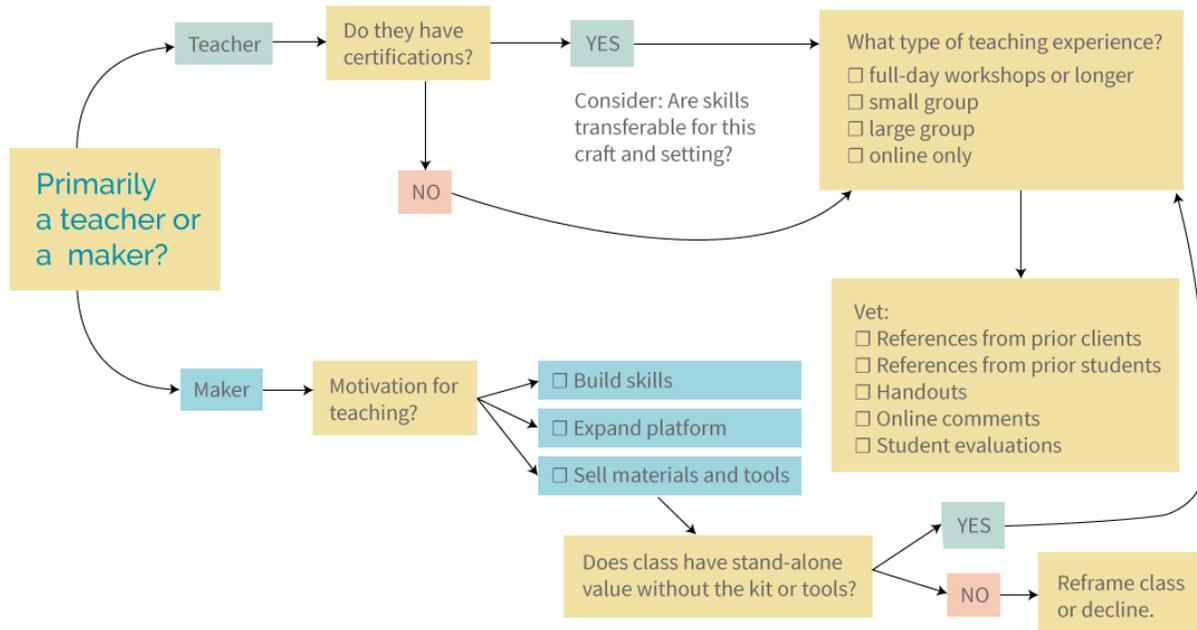
The acid test is how a teacher can break down a skill for a rank beginner. "It's easy for an expert talking with another to jump in the middle" and make assumptions about terms, tools and skills, says Swietlik. "But you have to ask the teacher to talk to you like you've never done it before. Where do you start?"

Even classes intended for those with intermediate or advanced skills need to start by getting everyone on the same page, adds Swietlik. Just because students have experience doesn't mean they have the

same experience, or even that they accomplish basic tasks in the same way. Teachers need to be able to “level” the material so that the whole class starts at the same place, she says. A good test is to ask the teacher to share the same knowledge in several ways, and to ask her to reframe the content on the spot to accommodate students whose background is not what she expected.



HOW TO VET A TEACHER



Other good questions to ask instructors:

- Where do people get stuck in this process?
- What’s the most intimidating aspect of this project?
- How do you work with classroom assistants?
- Does this class require the purchase of a tool or specific supplies, or can students bring their own?
- Will you provide printed handouts? (Most students prefer a printout as well as a digital archive of the material.)
- Show me your samples and walk me through how you put together a sample.
- When and to whom did you first teach this class? (Most teachers test new techniques and curriculum with their local guilds or groups of friends.)
- How have you evolved your approach based on student evaluations?
- How do you define class objectives?
- How do you define class success?
- Is this class exclusive? If not, how and when will it be available?



Online vs. Real Time

Online tutorials and videos provide insight into how a teacher organizes and presents material in a vacuum. Camera presentation and presence is its own skill, but shouldn't be mistaken for confidence in a room full of real people.

In fact, craft teachers generally aren't assessed on their ability to manage group dynamics, such as the skills of containing disruptive students, keeping critiques positive, and managing time. There are few mechanisms for helping teachers improve; student feedback forms are inconsistently written and used, while performance reviews are at the discretion of the host.

One of the few credentialing organizations is Islander Sewing Systems, a Michigan-based firm that licenses its sewing construction techniques to teachers who then market their classes on their own. Janet Pray, Islander owner, took over the business from her aunt, who originated the system.

Pray says that candidates often assume that their existing sewing skills automatically qualify them as instructors, but that's not the case. She quickly sizes up those who think they'll coast to an easy

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diploma: “If they can’t follow instructions, they can’t give instructions,” she says. “This certification is based up by real skills.”

How does the teacher herself continue to learn? The answer separates those who love teaching from those who just see it as one more marketing tool, says Diana Rupp, owner of the Make Workshop, a multi-craft work space and retail shop in Brooklyn.

Successful teachers watch online classes, take on-site classes and read others’ instructions to see how they can hone their own skills, she says. “I take classes all the time in skills I’m not proficient in just to stay on the learning curve,” says Rupp. “I want to have empathy with learners.”

Fans, Enthusiasts, and Groupies

The relationship between teachers and their followings is chicken-and-egg. Instructors typically count on classes and the related promotion to build awareness of their aesthetic, reputation, and offerings, while shops and hosts increasingly want teachers to drive interest, registrations, and revenues.

Online presence is the pivot point. Seasoned teachers like Manke say they pick the classes they’ll attend based on the teacher’s website, sample materials, and class descriptions.

And the context of the class also affects students’ expectations, experience, and evaluations, says Pray. Guild meetings are partly social and programs are expected to be entertaining and informative, she says. Shop owners expect teachers to use materials, tools, and equipment they offer for sale. Students taking an advanced multi-day course expect deep technical knowledge and one-on-one coaching—along with a serviceable product.

“Content is king,” says Swietlik. Craftsby, she says, coaches instructors in the nuances of online presentation so that consumers can adopt great ideas. “If you start a topic that people are interested in, people will come and they’ll be excited to take the class.”

“I want to have empathy with learners.”

Glossary

A class isn't a class isn't a class. Define the type of instruction you'll offer so that participants can anticipate the type of experience they are likely to have.

Class: Lecture format with demonstration and some hands-on learning. Usually not longer than

half a day.

Students expect interaction with the instructor.

Lecture:

Academic, research, or trend-based presentation based on the expertise of the speaker, often with slides or other visual aids, and with formal questions and answers.

Workshop:

Focuses on learning by doing with minimal formal presentation and maximum coaching and instructor interaction. Usually at least

half a day.

Demonstration:

Short technical that outlines a skill step by step.



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