



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1986 Volume III: Topics in Western Civilization: Ideals of Community and the Development of Urban Life,
1250-1700

The English Guild Method of Learning

Curriculum Unit 86.03.01
by Maryanne Basti

Five hundred centuries ago, learning took place in an entirely different setting than it does today. Students of an activity or craft very often learned by cultural experience; they served as apprentices from a very early age to learn by watching, doing, imitating, working. The contemporary teacher may find this longused, historical model of teaching very effective: the mastercraftsman, acting as role model, teaches and explains his art in a “do as I do” fashion to his apprentices. In my eight years of teaching art, I have always found my most successful lessons were those in which I did the actual project in front of my class. My students enjoy watching me work and benefit from seeing the actual steps unfold.

This way of teaching need not be limited to just the art room; learning by doing has application to many areas of knowledge. Formalized learning (that is, reading and analysis) can be very demanding; experiential learning can help balance “book” lessons by activity and involvement. Exposure to “hands on work” has value and benefit as well because it stimulates student interest and inquiry at times when formalized learning may overload the student’s capacity to “take in” knowledge. I find actual experience valuable for a number of reasons. First, as a result of their observing me work, students very naturally ask probing questions; through our question and answer exchanges, they develop greater understanding of the activity. Second, my working seems to have a contagious effect; for students are always eager to watch some actual activity, then try it themselves. Thirdly, by seeing that I can produce as well as explain art work, I am firmly establishing my credibility, a step which results in my receiving more respect and developing better rapport. Students learn by imitation and therefore it is important for teachers to establish their personal credibility and set forth quality examples. To summarize, the imitation of steps, the questioning, the verbal exchange of opinions and ideas are all crucial to the learning process and cannot be captured with just book learning alone.

In my art classes, the guild can become both a subject of study itself as well as a model for learning and producing art. As I introduce the concept of the guild, I will teach my students about its origins, history, purpose, and its vocabulary. From that start we will move into creating the guild experience, in which students will create by stimulation, encouragement, and interaction. The project which will create this experience will be the construction and decoration of the great hall in an English country house or castle. To accomplish this task, I will divide the class into the various guilds which would have done the actual work. The objective of this lesson is to have students: 1) experience learning by doing; 2) to experience the pride in creation of doing substantial quality work; and 3) develop a greater awareness, understanding and appreciation for the artisans and their crafts and for the business concepts, ideas and practices that they established. By sharing

information which I have compiled about the structure and function of the English guild, I hope to offer to teachers methods or ideas which can lead to meaningful learning experiences.

History

A guild is a body of men associated together under oath for a common purpose. It is interesting to note that women were also included. In an age of manual skills where men united to make and sell things, the guilds were the nurseries of English crafts and commerce. They were the educational system of the period.

Bishop Giles defined the guild as follows, "As to the word gild, it is of Saxon origin and is derived from Geldan or Gildan, which means 'to pay' because the members of societies so called whether united together for civil or religious purposes 'were Gildare' that is to pay something towards support of the brotherhood to which they belong" (Walford, p. 2). Gild is the older form of spelling; the newer more recent spelling is guild. Both spellings will be used throughout this paper. Use will be determined by the source from which the material was drawn. Although this paper will only be concerned with English guilds, it might be well to note that the Italian and other European guilds were similar in structure and function to the English variety.

"Gilds, Trade Unions, Friendly Societies and the Cooperative movement are all manifestations of the same spirit are all responses to the specific demands for special forms of combination" (Robinson, p. 6). Why unite? There were two main motives or reasons behind unity. First, the individual alone felt weak and sought strength and security from numbers. Second, men who were engaged in the same business found union desirable for mutual interests and social purposes. "The isolated individual can be compared to the chemical atom with little cohesive powers it is absorbed and destroyed. By adopting of his own free will, a law and submitting to it unconditionally, the individual assured himself a secure and decent livelihood and the possibility of intellectual freedom (Robinson p. 8). Gild members did unite for these very reasons and took an oath of fidelity to their society, swearing to obey the laws and to observe complete secrecy concerning all gild councils.

The guild system reached its highest level of development during the middle ages. This, however, does not imply that the gild was the invention or creation of this particular period. Guilds in various forms have been traced back to the following early societies: Oriental, Hindu, Essenian, Israelite, Roman Athenian and Spartan. The oldest evidence of guild practice was credited to Numa Pompilius, King of the Romans, who in 714-652 B.C. united musicians, carpenters and other artisans to the benefit of the entire community.

One of the many theories of town origins is the theory of association or the guild theory. This theory proposes that towns developed from brotherhoods, which had developed from religious to economic groupings. George Unwin has written much in the subject of guilds and is considered an authority on them. He has recognized their value in the growth of the life of the town and has estimated their force as a great social lever with equal emphasis. According to Unwin, "The Political liberty of Western Europe has been secured by the building up of a system of voluntary organizations strong enough to control the state and yet flexible enough to be constantly remolded by the free forces of change. It is hardly to much to say that the foundations of this system were laid in the guild. It was in the guild that voluntary association first came into a permanent relation with political power" (Robinson, p. 6). In the beginning cities broke away from the many feudal practices which had survived for centuries. Residents from the Norman and Saxon cities of the same trade banded together into Fraternities or brotherhoods under the spiritual protection of a saint chosen by reason of

his association with their particular craft. For example, Saint Peter was the greatest fisherman of all and thus became the patron saint of the fishmongers guild. Each guild had a patron and an emblem. Selecting a patron and designing an emblem will be incorporated into the lesson. Religious aspects or associations were extremely important and were embodied in all facets of guild life. Religious guilds were the first to be established and their strong influence penetrated the entire guild movement. The guild was a way of life, dictating the social, economical and religious behavior of the medieval Englishman. To sum up the rise and necessity for the guild, I will again quote George Unwins: "The growth of this movement resulted from the practical determination that the working man should no longer be the unprepared victim of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Co-operative movement shall note the enthusiastic toil for a great ideal" (Robinson, p. 5).

The preceding information sounds noble and idealistic. The guilds did contribute much to the development of a better human condition. As with all things dealing with human nature, guilds had their failings and shortcomings. To some extent, they were exclusionary and stifled free enterprise. This particular paper will be only concerned with the positive contributions, which were substantial. Under the heading of guild contributions the following can be listed: 1. produced quality workers producing quality work; 2. fostered arts and sciences; 3. developed and extended commerce; 4. molded national character and institutions, particularly in the social reform arena; 5. nurtured the principle of association for common protection in wealth and adversity; and 6. pioneered vocational and technical education.

Before the arrival of the guild, many common frauds were perpetrated on the public, such as moistening groceries to add to their weight, setting false stones in gold, soldering broken swords, weighting precious metals with pellets of lead, selling secondhand furs as new, deceiving the buyer with false samples, and placing stones in hay or wool stacks to add to their weight. There existed a definite need for quality control, honest business practices, and social security. The guild, whose purpose it was to teach and train apprentices, control quality and amount of production, and provide for the social security of its brotherhood, met these needs by providing skilled quality teaches and improved working conditions. The system was simple and unencumbered by an overwhelming bureaucracy. It worked as follows: the master worked and explained, the apprentice watched and copied. In time the apprentice became skilled and, as a master, passed his knowledge on. There existed a close, meaningful relationship between teacher and pupil. Objectives were clear and relatively simple and each participant knew and performed what was expected. "Many a gild gained much from such efforts and many improvements in working and in dealing with materials was due to the joint action of the bright intelligence of the young who were encouraged to think out improvements and suggestions and the experience of the old mastercraftsman" (Thornley and Hastings, p. 9). This educational philosophy was fostered and encouraged by all the guilds. Quality control was strictly adhered to and enforced. Guilds had their own courts, which employed searchers to go out into the work force and check for shoddy work. Offenders were publicly punished. As the population and business increased, the old craftsmen became teachers in small schools which taught bands of apprentices. "One of the reasons the guilds were so successful in the teaching and quality control aspect was due to their flexibility due to the voluntary character, tradition, and pride of ancient custom restraining forces guild still free to meet new conditions by fresh regulations and enlargement of the social area from which members were drawn" (Robinson, p. 11). A sense of responsibility to the community was ever-present and strong in the gild, and the main emphasis of the guild was to produce quality work.

Types

There are three types or groups of English guilds, each of which emerged at a different time. However, there is no sharp line of demarcation drawn between them. Guilds all crossed over into each other. “The kinds of guilds lived side by side each a fresh development being an expression of gild life to meet a new need an answer to a demand made by a change in methods of employment in the conditions of life, or in economic circumstances” (Robinson, p. 10).

The Frith or Peace guild was the first brotherhood to make its appearance. As its name suggests, its main purpose was to avenge wrongs and to keep the peace. It was the product of a lawless age. It came into being to protect life and Prosperity and it functioned as a type of sworn community performing police duties. Among its other contributors was a concern with the beautification of the towns and the organization of its people in solemn group meetings for prayer service.

The Social or Religious guilds were an offspring of the Frith or Peace guilds. These were symbolic of the growth of a fuller civilization and heightened aspirations. They exerted a humane and civilizing influence over the people of the period. Their objectives were both philanthropic and religious. Membership consisted of men and women of all ranks. The provisions made for mutual charity were both beneficial to the members and destined to have a far-reaching effect on legislation. “This grouping was the first to evolve and apply the methods and principles of mutual help and acceptance of some degree of responsibility of welfare—ever widening sense of responsibility which finally was accepted by the state” (Robinson, p. 46).

The merchant and craft guilds were a great social force. Merchants united to protect growing trade interests contending for monopolies as well as to protect their members from foreign competition. The craft guilds marked the advent of a new middle class, the growth of a more democratic spirit and an increasing division of labor. The main objective of the merchant craft guilds was to protect commercial interests and promote fair dealings and high standards in the quality of goods. Speculative buying for profit was strictly forbidden. This fact actually sapped prosperity and checked free enterprise.

The craft guilds arose when men first made one specific form of industry into the occupation of their lives. Weavers were the pioneers in the work of co-operation. Clothing satisfied a basic, universal need. As a result, the weavers occupation was the first to assume a position of importance and devotion for craftsmen. While merchant guilds resulted from a new impulse to trade, craft guilds arose from a recognition of the importance of quality work. The rise of the craft guild may be explained as this both historically and for the classroom; first there is a love of work and that is what makes a craftsman, but second, in order for the work to be the best it can be (of highest quality), society must achieve the levels of mastery through feedback, criticism and growth.

Craft guilds functioned on the principle that private interest and profit were secondary in importance to the reputation and efficiency of the trade. This belief led to all embracing regulations in order to eliminate defective wares. Two examples of enforced regulations were as follows: artisans were prohibited from working in garrets or chambers which were crowded or dark and were required to work in high streets and open shops; and night work was forbidden. Craft guild membership was selective—not to exclude rivals but to control quality production. Each craft guild had its own elaborate system of inspection. Most craft guilds had power to deal with those who offended against their regulations in their own courts but the accused had the right to appeal any sentence to the mayor.

Due to the rise of the merchant and craft guilds, the whole municipal, industrial and social life of the middle ages (with the exception of agriculture) moved into the circle of the guild. Guild life was all inclusive. Not only public interests but also social and moral interests were centered therein.

In conclusion a brief list or summary of the contributions make their legacy both clear and impressive.

- “1. Influenced English municipal, social and industrial life to an extraordinary extent for several centuries.
2. Most useful of their functions—helped build a social structure by which they have been superseded.
3. Charactertrained and raised
4. Religious spirit manifest
5. Discipline enforced
6. Schools of Citizenship” (Robinson, p. 3 & 4).

“By studying guilds, we can interpret this inner life and toil of multitudes—take account these silent forces, these moving causes, learn what history may teach. By study of the social and economic phenomena of the past man can equip himself to estimate rightly the complicated issues of the present or hope to throw light on the pressing anxieties of the immediate future” (Robinson, p. 4).

The experience of the guild (being together, commenting on each others work, exchange of ideas, group creativity, role of masterstudent) is what makes such high creativity and quality happen and this is what I want to show my students through the guild experience (recreated in the classroom). This high quality and artistic experience comes from the feedback encouragement, and stimulation a craftsman gets in the guild to inspire him to highest achievement. The lesson I have suggested is to recreate in the classroom the art work in the great hall of a medieval country house or castle through the guild experience. For it is this artistic achievement—social organization duality which really underlies the scope and purpose of this paper.

The objective of this lesson is to have students experience guild activity and group criticism; learn to accept feedback; understand guild hierarchy; and experience how art can grow from group interest, stimulation, and response interaction.

I have listed the steps we will take in the classroom to create a sense of group interaction that leads to increased interest and stimulation which is essential to the guild experience.

We will begin by studying the history and functions of the guild. This knowledge helps explain the phenomenon of the artistic growth I hope to have students experience.

Lesson Plan

The great hall is a huge, magnificently decorated hall in a country house or castle. It was the focal point of the building structure and was the center of activity for the entire household. All meals and festivities were celebrated there.

Project to have students create in their classroom a replica of a great hall—reproducing the necessary decorative elements. Students will do the hall as a guild would; they will imitate the guild, and plan, decide, respond, select, execute.

1. Discuss guilds—explain system of operation—need—varieties, all the foregoing.
Show slides or pictures of various great hall and discuss the decorative elements with
2. students. An excellent source for pictures is *Life in the English Country House*, Mark Girouard (see attached bibliography)
List with the students on the blackboard the decorative elements in a great hall. Your list could be as follows: richly carved long tables, bright decorative hanging banners, heavily
3. carved arcades, decorated dais (raised platform on which the Lord of the castles table was placed), canopy over dais, highly carved fireplace and wall chimneys, wall hangings, frescos and murals, tracery in windows, great screen, musicians gallery above great screen.
Make a list on the blackboard of the major guilds which would have been involved in the
4. project. Examples weavers, masons, painters, carpenters/woodworkers, sculptors. Have students join the one which they find most appealing.
5. After the guilds and their members have been established, it might be wise for you as teacher to assign the various jobs.
In guild tradition appoint a mastercraftsman (or a few mastercraftsmen) to each guild. It will be his responsibility to assist or aid his fellow workers and maintain quality standards. In order
6. that each student may have a chance in each role (mastercraftsman, apprentice), switch titles half way through the project.
7. Have each group establish an emblem and motto for their group.

Using readily available materials, proceed to have students design and execute art work which would have been found in a great hall and which will transform their classroom into one. By adding paper cutout designs such as brackets and trim work to ordinary classroom tables, the tables are transformed into banquet tables. In like fashion cutouts could be taped to windows to simulate tracery. Painters could paint murals and frescos while weavers could make cut felt wall hangings and banners. All the elements of the great hall could be handled in this manner. Encourage students to develop and create their own ideas.

As one can readily see, there is a wealth of ideas and projects which can be developed around this task.

The length of time involved in the execution of this unit will depend to a great extent upon the materials selected. For example, if one plans to do this unit with crayons and cut paper, the project will be completed in a relatively short amount of time. If, on the other hand, murals are painted and banners or wall hangings are done in a fibre medium, the unit can then take an entire semester to complete. This unit lends itself well to either situation. The time factor and degree of involvement is dictated solely by the teacher and the availability of materials.

When this task is completed and the classroom resembles a great hall it might be nice to plan a banquet or festival in celebration of the completion of the project.

Bibliography

Girouard, Mark. *Life in The English Country House* . New York: Penguin Books, 1980. Excellent source of illustrations for the study of a great hall. Necessary book for unit.

Hibbert, Francis Aidan. *The Influence and Development of English Gilds* . England: Cambridge University Press, 1891. Essential reading. Provides thorough factual information and yet provides a basic overall view of the English gilds.

Kramer, Stella. *The English Craft Guilds Studies in Their Progress and Decline* . New York: Columbia University Press, 1927. Information not well suited to unit.

Lambert, Rev. J. Malet. *Two Thousand Years of Gild Life* . London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Co. Limited, 1891. Some helpful information. Too detailed for this particular unit.

Meyer, Erwin F. *English Craft Gilds and Borough Governments of the Latter Middle Ages* . The University of Colorado Studies for February, 1929. Too detailed, not pertinent to this unit.

Robinson, M. Fothergill. *The Spirit of Association* . London: John Murray, Albemarle St. W., 1913. Excellent source of information. Interesting reading.

Thornley, John Charles and Hastings, George W. *The Guilds of the City of London and Their Liverymen* , London: The London and Counties Press Association, Limited, Covent Garden, W.C. Difficult reading. Very specific information.

University of Pennsylvania, Department of History. *Translations and Preprints from the Original Sources of European History* . Philadelphia, Pa., 1897.

Walford, Cornelius. *Gilds Their Origin, Constitution, Objects and Latter History* . London: George Redway, Covent Garden, 1888. Good source of information regarding origins.

Westlake, H.F. (MA, FSA). *The Parish Guilds of Medieval London* . New York: The MacMillan Company, 1919.

Hartman, Gertrude. *Medieval Days and Ways* . New York: Braziller, 1937. Excellent resource, copy available at the Institute office, Wall Street.

Pelner, Madeline. *Fabulous Feasts* . New York: Braziller, 1976. Excellent source for ideas for feast or festivals when great hall project completed.

Reddaway, T.F. *Livery Companies of Tudor London* . London: Arnold, 1975. (History, 15. 1966, pas. 287Ð299). Good overview, recommended strongly.

As a further recommended resource, a field trip to one or more of the great halls at Yale University would greatly enhance this unit.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>