Philosophy Through Doing

A fifteen-week syllabus built around Matthew B. Crawford's *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, with weekly microlectures given by the client

Prepared by Will Daddario, LMHC, LCAS · Will Daddario Counseling and Consulting PLLC · October 2026

A note on method

This syllabus answers a request: a client who wants more philosophy, but philosophy arriving through the hands rather than through books. It is an experiment in four registers at once. Pedagogy, because a syllabus sequences attention across fifteen weeks. Psychagogy, in Plato's old sense of the leading of a soul toward its own better arrangement. Philosophy, because each task is paired with a text that the task lets the client read from the inside. And therapy, because a person who rebuilds a toaster has, in the same hour, done something to the relation between his own hands, his judgment, and his frustration.

The formal device is the microlecture, borrowed from Matthew Goulish's *39 Microlectures*: each week closes with the client speaking to me in session, from memory, beginning with the words "Here's what I experienced." The doings come first; the saying comes after. Thought is the second moment of the work, its retrospective articulation, which is also the dialectical shape the syllabus follows throughout.

Theoretical touchstones

Aristotle's distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*, and between both of these and *techne*, stands behind everything here: making is a mode of knowing, and the craftsman's judgment (*phronesis* applied to materials) is knowledge that cannot be fully stated in advance of the doing. Hegel's master-slave discussion marks the same point from the side of recognition, since it is through worked-on things that self-consciousness first meets the permanence of its own activity. Marx radicalized the diagnosis: under capitalism the planning of work is separated from its execution, and the worker is estranged from what he makes. That separation of thinking from doing, carried into office work by the twentieth century, is Crawford's polemical target, and the Frankfurt School's continuation of it, most sharply in Marcuse, gives the abstracted, administered subject its familiar portrait. Arendt's *homo faber* supplies the third term: making establishes a world, and the made thing outlives the making as an object held in common. Heidegger's broken tool, finally, names what every week of this syllabus exploits: things announce themselves most loudly when they fail, and a person who deliberately opens something up is practicing a friendlier version of the same disclosure.

Crawford's own contribution is the argument that manual competence is epistemically serious: the trades demand judgment, humility, and attention precisely because materials resist projections. His second book, *The World Beyond Your Head*, on attention as an ethical achievement, enters the reading plan in the final movement.

How the course works

Three constants each week. First, the task: a piece of handywork, done at home, expected to take between twenty minutes and a few hours across the week, never more. Second, the reading: one chapter of *Shop Class as Soulcraft* per week (chapter numbers follow the 2009 Penguin paperback; shift page ranges to fit the client's pace), with three supplementary excerpts at the turning points. Third, the microlecture: three to five minutes, in session, delivered before any other agenda item, no notes, beginning "Here's what I experienced." The microlecture is not a report on task completion; it is the client's account of what the doing did to him.

The no-failure clause: a week that gets missed is data, not debt. The syllabus bends around state; it does not accumulate guilt. If a week is missed, the following session opens with the microlecture on that miss instead.

Movement I · Disassembly: attention before words (Weeks 1–3)

The toaster comes apart, gets understood, and goes back together. Heidegger's broken tool is the hinge: normally equipment is invisible, absorbed into use, and it becomes conspicuous only in breakdown. Taking apart a working thing makes breakdown the method rather than the accident. The contradiction the movement holds open: the client asked for philosophy in words, and the syllabus deliberately withholds words until after the hands have moved.

Week 1 · The toaster, opened. Task: acquire an inexpensive toaster (thrift store is fine), unplug it, and open it completely; nothing is reassembled this week. Every screw goes into a labeled tray or taped bag. Reading: Crawford, ch. 1. Microlecture prompt: attention itself, what it felt like to look inside a thing that had been invisible.

Week 2 · What holds it together. Task: twenty minutes a day with the parts; name the function of each; one sketch, quality irrelevant. Reading: Crawford, ch. 2. Microlecture prompt: the part that surprised you.

Week 3 · Closed again. Task: reassemble, plug in, and run the test. Reading: Crawford, ch. 3. Microlecture prompt: success and its strange flatness, or the failure, which is also data.

Movement II · Strategic breaking: diagnosis and repair (Weeks 4–6)

An object is broken deliberately, at a stress point of the client's choosing, diagnosed without being fixed, and then remade. Marx's account of estranged labor, planning severed from execution, gives the movement its frame in reverse: here the client owns both ends of the work. Crawford's distinction between diagnosing and fixing carries the therapeutic resonance on its own, since diagnosis without repair is exactly the discipline of sitting with a problem before acting on it.

Week 4 · Choose and break. Task: choose a small object or appliance; break it strategically, at a chosen stress point; document the choice in one sentence before breaking. Reading: Crawford, ch. 4, with Marx, "Estranged Labour" (excerpt, c. 6 pages). Microlecture prompt: the ethics of breaking something on purpose.

Week 5 · Diagnosis only. Task: no fixing permitted; the week is for naming what broke and why, exactly there. Reading: Crawford, ch. 5. Microlecture prompt: what diagnosis felt like when it was forbidden to end in a repair.

Week 6 · Remade. Task: repair. Reading: Crawford, ch. 6. Microlecture prompt: repair versus restore; whether the object is still itself.

Movement III · The fairy door: making for a world (Weeks 7–9)

A small door is built and installed at the base of a tree or wall in the garden, for no one. Arendt's *homo faber* is the hinge: the made thing establishes a world, and it does so here without a recipient, a function, or a market. The door is a gift without a beneficiary, which is also a first pass at the distinction between work done for wages and work done into the world.

Week 7 · Plans and materials. Task: design the door on paper and gather scrap wood, offcuts, anything free. Reading: Crawford, ch. 7, with Arendt, *The Human Condition*, the homo faber chapters (excerpt). Microlecture prompt: designing for no one.

Week 8 · Building. Task: build the door. Reading: Crawford, ch. 8. Microlecture prompt: hands over hours; whether boredom arrived, and what it was like to keep going.

Week 9 · Installed. Task: install the door in the garden; it stays. Reading: Crawford, ch. 9. Microlecture prompt: what the garden is, now that it has a door in it.

Movement IV · The pictures: dwelling as self-interpretation (Weeks 10–12)

Every picture hanging in the client's home comes down, stays down for a week, and goes back up in a new arrangement. The bare wall is the hinge: the arranged room is a claim about who lives there, and the week of emptiness makes that claim visible by suspending it. Judgment without standards is the skill under construction; there is no manual for where a picture goes, and Crawford's second book on attention as an ethical practice enters here.

Week 10 · Everything comes down. Task: take down every hanging picture; nothing goes back up. Reading: Crawford, ch. 10. Microlecture prompt: the bare wall.

Week 11 · Living with absence. Task: leave the walls empty; move nothing; look at them each day. Reading: Crawford, ch. 11. Microlecture prompt: what the wall shows when it shows nothing.

Week 12 · Rearranged. Task: hang everything back in a new arrangement. Reading: Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head*, a selection on attention. Microlecture prompt: the claim the new arrangement makes.

Movement V · Synthesis: repair in the world (Weeks 13–15)

The skills built on objects turn outward. A real repair is named and completed in the client's actual life; then the client designs a task of his own; then the syllabus closes on a single extended microlecture. The dialectical movement completes itself: doing, which began as the condition of thought, ends as its content.

Week 13 · A repair in the actual. Task: the client names and completes one real repair in his life: a leaky faucet, a broken chair, a strained relationship; his call entirely. Reading: the client's chosen chapter of *Shop Class*, reread. Microlecture prompt: what made it a repair.

Week 14 · His own task. Task: the client designs and executes a task of his own, in the spirit of the preceding twelve weeks. Reading: none. Microlecture prompt: open.

Week 15 · The closing microlecture. Task: nothing new. In session: an extended microlecture, ten to fifteen minutes, on what doing taught that saying could not. We reread one passage of Crawford chosen together, and review the fifteen weeks as a single arc.

Appendix A · Therapist-facing notes

Clinical rationale. The syllabus is behavioral activation with a philosophical overlay. Bandura's finding that self-efficacy grows most reliably from mastery experiences, from succeeding at something by one's own hands, underwrites the arc from disassembly to repair to self-designed work: each movement is calibrated to be completable, and the sequence raises the stakes slowly. The sensorimotor content doubles as grounding work; the client who is anxious or spiraling is holding screws, and the object draws affect out of rumination and into something with edges.

The microlecture as clinical material. Retrospective narration after action builds the observing ego: the client becomes the one who can tell what happened to him. Listen for three things across the fifteen weeks: how state varies by phase (planning, doing, finishing), whether attention is described as effortful or given, and whether frustration arrives as a signal or a verdict.

Observation points. Reassess at weeks 5 and 10, mirroring the arc of the task difficulty: week 5 closes the first repair cycle, week 10 closes the third movement. Both reassessments ask the same question in different clothes: what does capacity look like when the task has no words in it?

No-failure clause and pacing. Missed weeks are data, not debt; re-prompt with the microlecture on the miss itself. Tasks are capped at a few hours per week. If a task opens a frustration spiral rather than a tolerable one, bring the work into session: a tray of toaster parts on the office table converts a private failure into a shared one.

Safety. Unplug anything before opening it. A toaster is safe to disassemble once unplugged, but avoid anything containing a power supply or battery (phone chargers, televisions), which can hold charge after unplugging. Keep tools basic: screwdrivers, pliers, sandpaper, wood glue. Gloves for the garden week. No ladder work; nothing on the syllabus requires one.

Documentation and ending. Microlectures may be recorded only with written consent; otherwise keep summary notes in the usual chart. At week 15, review the arc and decide together whether a follow-on syllabus is warranted; this format composes well as a series.

Appendix B · Materials list

Thrift-store toaster (about five dollars); screwdriver set (flathead and Phillips); masking tape and zip bags for screws; one small object for the breaking week, chosen by the client; wood scraps or offcuts, sandpaper, wood glue, small hinges and screws for the fairy door; picture hooks for week 12; garden gloves. Total cost should stay under twenty-five dollars across the fifteen weeks, which is itself part of the design: the syllabus runs on what ordinary life has lying around.

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