

City Room  
Blogging From the Five Boroughs

## A Trade School Where Ideas Are Currency

By Emily S. Rueb February 23, 2010 5:07 pm

On Sunday evening, 16 people gathered in a cramped Lower East Side storefront for a class on making irrational decisions. One woman was between jobs and apartments and wanted help thinking things through; the artist sitting next to her wanted to shut off the part of her brain that impedes creative thinking. No money changed hands. Instead, the teacher asked everyone to “pay” for the class by bringing ideas — an example of a good decision made in the last two weeks, and one made in the last five years.

The organizers of this place call it a **Trade School**, but they’ve turned the “trade” into a verb. It’s a month-long experiment in bartering services and ideas where teachers, D.I.Y. buffs, **Maker Faire** entrepreneurs, even high school students sign up for classes ranging from the concrete (crocheting and portrait photography) to the abstract (daydreaming and the foundations of ghost hunting).

In return for their services, teachers have received a trombone serenade, a block of cheese, a pair of socks or even Tootsie Rolls, as payment. So far, more than 800 people have matriculated.

The school is inside a 350-square-foot space on Norfolk Street that was once a barber shop that also dealt drugs. The place is furnished with recycled objects from the paint-bucket stools on up (and down), a testament to the mission of the organizers, a group known as **OurGoods**, a bartering network for artists that was, until January, only online.

At another class on Sunday, “Business for Artists,” the teacher, **Amy Whitaker**, asked for travel recommendations or a pie-in-the-sky idea: What would you do if money were no object? In the past, she’s asked for Facebook and Twitter tutorials, vegetarian recipes and band recommendations.

“The barter just feels like good will, like kindness and thoughtfulness the way a gift does,” she said. “It’s the inverse of how weird it would be if a friend invited you over for dinner and then asked you to chip in money afterward.”

Jeremy Fisher, a former investment banker who has taken five classes and hopes to start a Web site that aggregates restaurant reviews, sees it as an opportunity to network.

“Once you’re working there aren’t as many opportunities to connect with people,” he said. He said he liked the feeling of paying with something other than filthy lucre. “I would not have paid \$15 for a class,” he said. “But I would have gone out of my way to get a nice bottle of Belgian beer, if that’s what was asked for. I am willing to pay more because of the perceived value of what I’m getting.”

Caroline Woolard, a Jill-of-many-trades who co-founded **OurGoods**, said the venture was about creating a new model for completing creative projects **with mutual respect instead of cash**. She said she hoped it would be a model for artists, performers and other “cultural producers” to find others with the resources they need to complete their projects. Eventually, the group hopes to serve the more general population, as sites like **BarterQuest**, **Itex.com** and even **Craigslist** have done.

For now, the five members of **OurGoods** are operating without a budget, donating their hours and resources. Even the physical space was gained through bartering services with the design firm **GrandOpening**. Funding has come from the **Brooklyn Arts Council** and **The Field’s Economic Revitalization for Performing Artists**.

What’s next for **OurGoods**? There’s a class for that. On Monday, March 1, from 7 to 9 p.m., all are welcome to exchange ideas in a forum.

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