

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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NEW YORK

Lots of Class, No Cash

By V.L. Hendrickson

Updated Feb. 5, 2011 12:01 a.m. ET

For a cache of arrowheads or extra flashlights, New Yorkers can learn cartooning from a 10-year-old, while a bunch of organic arugula can bring them the secrets to retiring at 30 and a pound of coffee can help them take amazing photographs with any camera.



A student adds to the collection of barter-for-instruction items at the Trade School on Prince Street. MARK OVASKA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The only thing students can't do at the Trade School, which opened Wednesday at a former elementary school at 32 Prince St., is pay for a class with actual currency. Classes are available for barter only.

"We want people to think about barter and get excited about the social benefits," said Caroline Woolard, one of the co-founders of the Trade School.

For the first night of classes, students filed through the pastel-colored hallways of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral School lugging bottles of wine, food to share and books to trade for instruction. Seated in a circle of tiny chairs with attached desks, the 20- and 30-something crowd listened to Yale philosophy professor Matthew Noah Smith talk about community organizing before sharing their own plans for action. Other events this week include an idea party and a brunch on Saturday.

More than 30 classes are currently scheduled, but many more will be added after the Trade School gets going. The organizers intentionally waited until last week to allow people to submit proposals for classes.

"We like the idea that students become teachers," Ms. Woolard said.

Classes range from skill-based workshops, such as crochet for left-handers, to information-laden lectures on how to start a business. Almost all of the proposals for classes are accepted and anyone is eligible to teach. The youngest teacher is the 10-year-old, who is a two-year veteran of the comic business.

"Our teachers are more enthusiasts than specialists," Ms. Woolard said. "It's interesting to see what classes fill up. Like how to make a tote bag and coptic sewing are full, but also how to retire at 30 and Christopher Robbin's class on squatting the condos."

When students register for a class, they browse the teacher's list of items for barter and choose something from the list to bring as payment. Co-founder Louise Ma said she thinks this brings a familiar atmosphere to the school.

"In a class you pay for, it usually takes three to four sessions for people to warm up to each other," she said. "Here it happens in the first 20 minutes."

Ms. Ma, Ms. Woolard and another Cooper Union graduate, Richard Watts, developed the Trade School's barter-for-instruction model last year at Grand Opening, a pop-up storefront on Norfolk Street. Seventy-six classes were taught during the month they were open, on topics ranging from butter making to daydreaming.

The Trade School is scheduled to run through April 17, but classes may be extended.

"Whether it will be extended or not is emblematic of the looseness of the structure of the Trade School," said Melman. "The uncertainty is the reason we're doing this."

That, and the arrowheads.