

# Creative Hookey: Or Five Ways To Learn And Earn By Staying Out Of School

By Barbara Sher

## 1. Nerve

Otherwise known as talking your way through a door with nothing going for you but talent, cheek, and desperation. If you know what you'd be good at, there's nothing lost and often much to gain – by walking into wherever you want to be and presenting yourself.

This is the way my own career got started. When I came to New York, I had a B.A. in anthropology. Now there is nothing on earth more useless for getting a job than anthropology. You find me an ad that says, “Wanted: B.A. in anthropology.” I'd like to see it. I was what you might call highly unemployable. But I had to find a job that would feed my kids, and I was naive enough to hope for one that wouldn't starve my soul. I had the intuitive feeling that I would probably be good at working with people. So I screwed up my small supply of courage and answered one of those ads that said, “Experience preferred.” I noticed that it didn't say, “Required,” and anyway I figured that the experience of walking around on earth for thirty years ought to count for something. The job was a counselor in a drug program, and I talked my way into it – probably because they needed manpower as badly as I needed the job.

I walked in there at nine in the morning with my knees shaking. By 5:00 P.M. I knew I hadn't been wrong. I might be green, but I was in my element. From there, one thing led to another. While I was still working at that job, I started group therapy. Within a year, I became an assistant-trainee of the head therapist. And then four of us split off from him and started Group Laboratories. Over the next eleven years I made a tidy living doing group and individual counseling; I was a consultant at three medical schools, teaching their psychiatrists and psychologists; and I got invited to speak and give creativity workshops all over the country. None of this happened because I had a piece of paper. It happened because I found the right swimming pool, squeezed my eyes shut, and jumped in.

## 2. Volunteering

In a world of professionalism, where money is the measure of seriousness, volunteering has gotten something of a bad name. It's supposed to be amateurish, dilettantish, the sort of half-committed play-at-work that society matrons do on alternate Tuesdays. I want to set the record straight right now. Volunteer work is one of the best ways there is to get your feet wet and gain experience in a new field – whether it's the zoo, a hospital, a school, a museum, a neighborhood newspaper, a political campaign office, or family farm. You don't need credentials or prior experience. You don't have to pay them a cent for your training. But what's best is that volunteering gets you started doing what you love right away, even if it's only once a week. Or – if you're trying out a tentative goal – it lets you get the living feel of a profession

before you commit yourself to full-time work or training. And it equips you with experience, contacts, and references that will be useful if and when you do decide to make that commitment.

Three years ago, Diane was a 24-year-old secretary with a B.A. in nothing special. Her secret dream was to be a city planner. She was totally unqualified; all she had going for her was a passionate love for New York City. She loved to walk around and savor the flavors of the different neighborhoods, and she wished everyone could see and appreciate the city the way she did. But that special quality of vision wasn't going to get her into graduate school, and in any case, she couldn't afford to quit her job and study full-time. Even night-school classes were beyond her pocketbook. For the clincher, New York City happened to be going broke just then, and the city planning department was firing people, not hiring them.

That's a pretty staggering list of obstacles. Nonetheless, today Diane has an M.A. in city planning and a high-paying job with a major corporation. She works for the relocation office, introducing recently transferred executives and their families to the resources and delights of their new home. How did she do it?

In a brainstorming session, Diane came up with something she could do right away, and for free: take part in the local planning-board meetings. She was so outspoken and enthusiastic in those meetings that within a few months, everyone from block association leaders to city councilmen were calling her for ideas and advice. By the time she felt ready to apply for school, she knew most of the people who really make things happen in the city, and they all wrote her recommendations. She was awarded a full-tuition scholarship to Hunter College!

After one semester, she was hired into a teaching assistantship that paid her way. Diane was now not only studying and teaching city planning – she was already doing it every week on those local committees. And by the time she finished her Master's, her contacts and reputation were so widespread that she was offered a job in the first corporation she walked into.

### 3. The Sorcerer's Apprentice

The most ancient and natural way to acquire skills and knowledge is by hanging out with someone who's got them – watching, asking, helping. Before schools were invented, doctors, lawyers, and great painters all learned their trades this way. Psychoanalysts and carpenters still do. It's how I learned to be a therapist. There's an element of apprenticeship in any good education – but in many fields you can set up an apprenticeship for yourself.

My feeling is that there's hardly a person on this planet you couldn't walk up to and say, "I've followed your work for a long time, and I'd really like to learn from you. I won't cause you any trouble. I'll empty your wastebaskets, I'll clean your workshop, I'll carry your gear. I just want to be near your mind." It's a rare curmudgeon who wouldn't be flattered and receptive. Most highly accomplished people want to share what they know with other great minds. Seriousness of interest and a willingness to help out are the only real qualifications. A young potter named Juan Hamilton became the assistant and close companion of the great painter Georgia O'Keefe. Agnes Nixon, reigning queen of soaps and creator of (among others) "All My Children" and

“Another World,” got her start sharpening pencils for Irma Phillips, who pioneered the soap opera form.

There are formal programs that have been set up to connect willing “masters” with would-be apprentices. But you don’t need a formal program to put you in touch with someone whose work you love. You don’t even have to go in cold with a letter that may or may not be answered.

#### **4. Start From Scratch: The Independent Alternative**

Another way to start out on your path without a degree is to simply sit down, draw up a plan for a mime class, political seminar, walking tour, art-therapy group, or editing service, and put your ad in your local paper. That’s the wonderful thing about doing what you love: you can do it wherever you are, because your resources are really inside yourself. All you need is talent, personal experience, love – and a carefully worked-out idea, or program design. How do you think Weight Watchers got started? Jean Nidetch wasn’t a doctor or a nutritionist. She was a lady who wanted to be thin. She designed a package for other people like herself and turned it into a multimillion-dollar business.

Whether what you want to be is rich and nationally known or just to hold weekly discussion groups in your living room, remember that the key to survival and success for any independent program is an angle. What you’ve got to do is find and fill a specific need that nobody else has thought of filling. That’s what Jean Nidetch did. A therapist I know designed a series of seminars called “Who Takes Care of the Caretakers?” for therapists, counselors – and mothers! Jake, a marine biology freak who didn’t want to go to grad school, started a seaside nature museum for kids and got a grant from his city.

#### **5. The Generalist/Popularizer**

I wish I could think of a better name for this one – maybe “the go-between.” It’s a strategy for anyone who’s fascinated by the poetry of a technical field but hasn’t got the knack or the patience for technical training.

Many professional people can use help communicating their ideas to the public. They’re specialists in physics or nutrition or international law, not in the graceful use of the English language. If you can write, or even just organize ideas, you can get up to your ears in any field without a degree. A 20-year old college English major who wanted to be a member of the first space colony decided to start by doing magazine interviews with scientists like Carl Sagan and Gerard O’Neill. A housewife interested in nutrition developed a newsletter for the food industry on federal labeling regulations. Writing, editing, interviewing, starting a specialized newsletter or cable-TV talk show – any of these could be wonderful ways to gain admission to a world you love without the expensive ticket of a Ph.D.

Those are just a few examples of the kind of direct, ingenious routes to your goal you can dream up if you take conventional “wisdom” as a challenge instead of a finality. We’ve been talking about credentials and schooling, but the same goes for any obstacle that looms large on

your Problems List. I can't brainstorm every kind of goal and problem for you... But I don't have to. You have the prime source of all the ideas you'll ever need right between your ears.

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### **About the Author**

Barbara Sher is a business owner, career counselor, speaker, and the bestselling author of *Wishcraft*, *I Could Do Anything, If Only I Knew What It Was*, *How to Discover What You Really Want and How to Get It*, and *Live the Life You Love*. Her newest book, *It's Only Too Late If You Don't Start Now, How to Create Your Second Life at Any Age*, is a highly unconventional look at the second half of life. Her hilarious hour-long [PBS special](#) by the same name has been submitted for an Emmy nomination and is winning accolades wherever it is shown. To learn more about Barbara visit [BarbaraSher.com](#)