Zach Sims, left, and Ryan Bubinski started a business called Codecademy to teach people computer code.

By JENNA WORTHAM
Parlez-vous Python? What about Rails or JavaScript? Foreign languages tend to wax and wane in popularity, but the language du jour is computer code.

The market for night classes and online instruction in programming and Web construction, as well as for iPhone apps that teach, is booming. Those jumping on board say they are preparing for a future in which the Internet is the foundation for entertainment, education and nearly everything else. Knowing how the digital pieces fit together, they say, will be crucial to ensuring that they are not left in the dark ages.

Some in this crowd foster secret hopes of becoming the next Mark Zuckerberg. But most have no plans to quit their day jobs — it is just that those jobs now require being able to customize a blog’s design or care for and feed an online database.

“Inasmuch as you need to know how to read English, you need to have some understanding of the code that builds the Web,” said Sarah Henry, 39, an investment manager who lives in Wayne, Pa. “It is fundamental to the way the world is organized and the way people think about things these days.” Ms. Henry took several classes, including some in HTML, the basic language of the Web, and WordPress, a blogging service, through Girl Develop It, an organization...
based in New York that she had heard about online that offers lessons aimed at women in a number of cities. She paid around $200 and saw it as an investment in her future.

“I'm not going to sit here and say that I can crank out a site today, but I can look at basic code and understand it,” Ms. Henry said. “I understand how these languages function within the Internet.” Some see money to be made in the programming trend. After two free computer science classes offered online by Stanford attracted more than 100,000 students, one of the instructors started a company called Udacity to offer similar free lessons. Treehouse, a site that promises to teach Web design, picked up financing from Reid Hoffman, the founder of LinkedIn, and other notable early investors.

General Assembly, which offers workroom space for entrepreneurs in New York, is adding seven classrooms to try to keep up with demand for programming classes, on top of the two classrooms and two seminar rooms it had already. The company recently raised money from the personal investment fund of the Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and DST Global, which backed Facebook.

The sites and services catering to the learn-to-program market number in the dozens and have names like Code Racer, Women Who Code, Rails for Zombies and CoderDojo. But at the center of the recent frenzy in this field is Codecademy, a start-up based in New York that walks site visitors through interactive lessons in various computing and Web languages, like JavaScript, and shows them how to write simple commands.

Since the service was introduced last summer, more than a million people have signed up, and it has raised nearly $3 million in venture financing.

Codecademy got a big break in January when Michael R. Bloomberg, the mayor of New York, made a public New Year's resolution to use the site to learn how to code. The site is free. Its creators hope to make money in part by connecting newly hatched programmers with recruiters and start-ups.
“People have a genuine desire to understand the world we now live in,” said Zach Sims, one of the founders of Codecademy. “They don’t just want to use the Web; they want to understand how it works.”

The blooming interest in programming is part of a national trend of more people moving toward technical fields. According to the Computing Research Association, the number of students who enrolled in computer science degree programs rose 10 percent in 2010, the latest year for which figures are available.

Peter Harsha, director of government affairs at the association, said the figure had been steadily climbing for the last three years, after a six-year decline in the aftermath of the dot-com bust. Mr. Harsha said that interest in computer science was cyclical but that the current excitement seemed to be more than a blip and was not limited to people who wanted to be engineers.

“To be successful in the modern world, regardless of your occupation, requires a fluency in computers,” he said. “It is more than knowing how to use Word or Excel but how to use a computer to solve problems.”

That is what pushed Rebecca Goldman, 26, a librarian at La Salle University in Philadelphia, to sign up for some courses. She said she had found herself needing basic Web development skills so she could build and maintain a Web site for the special collections department she oversees.

“All librarians now rely on software to do our jobs, whether or not we are programmers,” Ms. Goldman said. “Most libraries don’t have an I.T. staff to set up a server and build you a Web site, so if you want that stuff done, you have to do it yourself.”

Correction: March 27, 2012
An online summary for this article misspelled the name of the company started by Zach Sims and Ryan Bubinski. It is Codecademy, not Codeacademy. An earlier version also misstated the employer of Rebecca Goldman as Drexel University.

A version of this article appeared in print on March 28, 2012, on page B1 of the New York edition with the headline: Craving Internet Fluency.


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