

Teaching tech at CoderDojo



Celebrating CoderDojo Tramore's first birthday.

A local CoderDojo club celebrated its first birthday at the weekend.

The CoderDojo movement is run by volunteer mentors and parents, and leading tech companies across the world have backed plans to expand CoderDojo clubs for children who want to learn computing coding.

There are more than 500 Dojos or clubs in more than 48 countries, reaching 25,000 children.

In Ireland, there are 120 centres, with more than 6,000 young people attending the clubs on a weekly basis.

One of these clubs is located in Tramore, and celebrated its first anniversary at the weekend.

The CoderDojo movement is going from strength to strength and is a concept which we are sure to hear much more of in 2015.

For those of us who aren't tech-savvy, Tramore CoderDojo founder Karen Mc Carthy explained the concept.

"Coding means using programming languages to create games, websites and applications. CoderDojo's main focus is on coding but they also facilitate projects that include 3D design, graphic design, engineering and robotics, basically anything related to technology," she explained.

"A Dojo is a place where people meet to learn from each other. CoderDojos encourage creativity in a relaxed, fun and social manner and involves collaboration with its global network."

CoderDojo, which is a non-profit movement, was founded by James Whelton and Bill Liao.

In 2011, James Whelton (then aged 18) found himself the centre of publicity after hacking the iPod Nano.

As a result, some younger students expressed an interest in learning how to code.

James established a computer club in his school where he began teaching students and later that year met entrepreneur and philanthropist Bill Liao, who was interested in growing the project.

All Dojos have different styles of operating but they all hold the same ethos and operate according to the CoderDojo Charter.

At a typical CoderDojo Tramore meeting, registered boys and girls between the ages of 7 and 17, sign-in then find a seat and chat while turning on their laptops or they use one of the laptops that have been donated.

"This term there are three groups, each with a lead mentor who explains the tasks. During sessions each group has three mentors who support and encourage the boys and girls," explained Karen.

"Coders are also free to move around and chat about their projects with peers. There is a break at half time, with much loved biscuits and a drink, organised by volunteers; Eva, 'the hall monitor' and Patricia 'the biscuit lady'."

CoderDojo is financed through donations, fundraising and sponsorship of equipment and other necessities.

The sponsorship element associated with CoderDojo appears to be a win-win situation for all involved.

Sponsorship helps to ensure that CoderDojo activities are free regardless of a family's financial circumstances.

Sponsoring helps to pay for utilities and buy equipment that will improve the experience and learning capabilities of all coders, while for the sponsors, supporting a community project improves businesses reputation and generates positive publicity.

Karen believes there are many benefits of getting involved with CoderDojo, whether it's attending, volunteering or through sponsorship.

"Kids learn important IT skills that will be in high demand for future jobs, they create games instead of merely playing them and coding builds confidence as kids showcase their work while developing communication and networking skills," she said.

"Coders love the relaxed, fun atmosphere; they set their own goals and work on overcoming the challenges involved in solving problems."

Karen says she would love to see more girls becoming involved with CoderDojo Tramore and with IT in general.

"The percentage of girls involved in IT is very low and coding is too important to be left to half the population," she said.

“CoderDojo Tramore has approximately 25 per cent girls and we would love to see that increase as equality and diversity can only make us stronger and improve everyone’s experience. Both men and women use technology so harnessing the creativity from both genders can only enhance end users experience.”

A great day was had by all in attendance at the first birthday celebrations held on Saturday, as Karen explained: “It was a great afternoon of fun, games and food, thanks to our first birthday sponsors: Apache Pizza and Dooly’s Chipper in Tramore. Everyone was delighted with the feast. Mentors Aoife Ní Puirséil and David O’Grady explained about the Coolest Projects Awards 2015 that the coding ninjas will be entering this June in Dublin. Oisín Beresford who turned 10 years old last week demonstrated to an eager audience, how he made his own mods using a 3D CAD design tool and installed them into Minecraft.”

Karen also expressed thanks to all who have helped CoderDojo Tramore through donations and sponsorship this last year. “CoderDojo Tramore’s survival is dependent on donations, fundraising and sponsorship and it has been very lucky so far. Teva Pharmaceutical Industries and Sunlife donated laptops so girls and boys without laptops aren’t excluded and Ingemit sponsored T-Shirts for our mentors,” she said.

“Special thanks to Joe Stokes and Tramore Development Trust for the use of the Meeting Place in Tramore and to Joe for joining our birthday celebrations and cutting the first birthday cake,” she added.

To get in touch with CoderDojo Tramore regarding sponsorship opportunities, becoming a volunteer or attending their dojo, email tramore.ie@coderdojo.com, or find them on Facebook & Twitter.