

LEARN TO CODE

In 2021, the economic imperative to train and retrain has never been so strong. After the pandemic’s dramatic impact on artists’ economies, a skepticism about “creative” work is emerging, portraying it as unproductive daydreaming, and a wholly unessential industry. The emphasis is now on hard labor and effectiveness. The fundamental idea of Learn to Code is that the ability to program is a historical necessity for people working at a useless or obsolete job, and that these people must serve the economic imperatives of capitalism. This servitude is referred to as “retraining”. Perhaps it is useful at this point to briefly reiterate the distinction between coders and programmers. While programmers are recognized as having an acknowledged and relatively arcane expertise with a correspondingly high salary, coding is increasingly perceived as semi-skilled labor. The programmer belongs to a profession, the coder to a workforce. Back to design. Currently, public recognition of graphic designers is not so different from that of journalists. Both are now perceived as entire professions that it would be good to automate once and for all. Jobs meant to become buttons. According to this scenario, coding emerges as a professional panacea linked to the rhetoric of skill obsolescence and employability. Coding becomes a skill, in the most reductive sense of the term: something to add to your CV, better if exploded into discrete units. HTML and CSS: good, JavaScript: basic. The book Graphic Design Surveyed shows that US and UK students consider coding the third most useful skill to acquire (after networking and idea generation). In 2014, German media theorist Florian Cramer dissected the various meanings of the term “post-digital”. One of them was “the contemporary disenchantment with digital information systems and media gadgets.” The Learn to Code meme suggests that disenchantment does not only revolve around the tools of the trade, but also around the trade itself. Coding, in the light of retraining, doesn’t seem to be so emancipating. Another understanding of post-digital Cramer highlighted has to do with the revival of old media. This might be a bit of a stretch, but what is more “old media”, more 20th-century, than the idea of a workforce to be forged for the good of the nation? Of course, the Learn to Code narrative hints at the fact that jobs, skills and aspirations do not exist in a vacuum. However, due to a combination of disenchantment with programming and old-media labor rhetoric, coding emerges as a post-digital manifestation of capitalist realism, forcing graphic designers, journalists and coal miners alike to deal with their situations. All of them must go through mandatory updates, just like software. Is programming itself immune to this logic? Not really, it would seem, as the angelus novus of AI promises or threatens (depending on whom you ask) to automate the coder as well.

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