Exploring the Digital Habits of Girls Who Code

Girls Who Code is a non-profit organization which was established in 2012 and founded by Reshma Saujani, CEO and former Deputy Advocate of New York City. With over 112, 000 followers on Facebook and 150, 000 followers on Twitter, its mission is to close the gender gap by inspiring, educating and equipping girls with the computing skills necessary to pursue 21st century opportunities (Girls Who Code, 2016). Girls Who Code not only provides access to funding and programs, it also creates a vehicle for technology to intertwine with the community in order to foster learning. This concept, developed by Etienne Wenger, emphasizes how technology can provide opportunities to find learning partners in an effort to connect with them in meaningful ways (Wenger, White and Smith, 2009, p. 4).

Learning takes place at various levels within this organization beginning with some of the core programs of Girls Who Code which includes the seven week Summer Immersion Program for high school girls and the Girls Who Code Club Program for both middle school and high school girls. Both of these programs take place in a predetermined location and are fashioned similarly after one another. Recruitment for all of their programs takes places at the level of social media via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and blogs. At the foundational core, these programs have three major learning outcomes which include providing girls with 21st Century Skills, exposing the female participants to all aspects of the technology industry and having young girls work alongside female mentors in the field.

The mentors are comprised of top female executives, engineers and entrepreneurs in the technology industry and their function is to provide career and academic mentoring. The mentoring program is a key component associated with the success of the Summer Immersion Program and the Girls Who Code Club Program in which the students take part in what could be considered a form of apprenticeship. The role of the mentorship program can be compared with Wenger’s communities of practice in which the learning component is central to the relationship between the practitioner and the mentor (Wenger et al., 2009, p. 4). Within this organization, learning takes place through formal, as well as, informal activities.

Opportunities for learning include recruitment in the Teachers Who Code Program. The original members of Teachers Who Code consisted of 20 teachers which were involved in a pilot program in the New York City area. Their mission was to serve as game changers in the field of computer science education and transform teaching practices in high schools across New York City. Teachers Who Code has now evolved from an onsite pilot program to interactive webinars for the online community with a continued mission on closing the gender gap in computer science education. Sustaining the process of learning together provides an identity for the community, a set of issues and challenges in which the members recognize themselves as learning partners (Wenger et al., 2009, p. 5). At Girls Who Code, technology has provided not only a means of sharing information but also a vehicle to facilitate learning in order to work towards a common goal.

Extended opportunities for learning also take place at the level of legitimate peripheral participation. Not all of the Girls Who Code followers participate in the summer programs, clubs or webinars. Some of the followers can be identified as “lurkers”. In terms of a community of practice, lurking can be interpreted as “legitimate peripheral participation” (Wenger, et al., 2009, p. 9). In other words, participants that are on the periphery are taking part in the learning process even though they are not regularly posting or actively involved within the community. Participants on the periphery look towards Girls Who Code to learn more about how they can take action and instill change in their very own communities. The organization uses its platform to educate followers and to contribute to conversations related to gender equality in STEM fields. Most recently, Girls Who Code posted an article on their Facebook newsfeed entitled, Women Are Better at Coding than Men-If They Hide Their Gender. The article examines how gender impacts the contributions on open source repositories such as GitHub (Brown, 2016). This is one of the many articles that are shared within the learning community to raise awareness about gender inequality in STEM fields with the hope of contributing to its diversity.

Girls Who Code is extremely active in the social media community with the ultimate goal of increasing followers within the community. Opportunities for participation include following featured bloggers and posting blogs. The featured bloggers are predominately women and girls who are actively involved in the field of computer science. In addition, Girls Who Code encourages followers to share the mission of the organization with their own followers on LinkedIn, Pinterest, Tumblr, Blogger and a variety of additional social media sites.

At the heart of the Girls Who Code movement is the need to create gender parity within the technology industry by providing access and sharing information about the importance of exposing girls to computer science. This call to action is in direct response to the data reported by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration (2011) which indicates that while women represent half of the American workforce, they are greatly underrepresented in STEM careers, holding less than 25% of STEM jobs.

Furthermore, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), employment in the field of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) is projected to grow to more than nine million between 2012 and 2022. This figure is an increase of over one million jobs over the 2012 employment rates (Vilorio, 2014, p.2). The lack of women represented in STEM fields combined with the vast number of projected job opportunities is all the more reason to empower girls to learn coding. Equally important is the need to reflect gender diversity within the tech industry leadership which is nearly non-existent in Silicon Valley (Dupere, K., 2016).

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