

“Engage Me or Enrage Me” WHAT TODAY’S LEARNERS DEMAND

By Marc Prensky

“Today’s kids are not ADD, they’re EOE.”

—Kip Leland, Los Angeles Virtual Academy

Anyone who has taught recently will recognize these three kinds of students:

1. *The students who are truly self-motivated.* These are the ones all teachers dream about having (and the ones we know how to teach best). They do all the work we assign to them, and more. Their motto is: “I can’t wait to get to class.” Unfortunately, there are fewer and fewer of these.
2. *The students who go through the motions.* These are the ones who, although in their hearts they feel that what is being taught has little or no relevance to their lives, are farsighted enough to realize that their future may depend on the grades and credentials they get. So they study the right facts the

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night before the test to achieve a passing grade and become at least somewhat successful students. Their motto: “We have learned to ‘play school.’”

3. *The students who “tune us out.”* These students are convinced that school is totally devoid of interest and totally irrelevant to their life. In fact, they find school much less interesting than the myriad devices they carry in their pockets and backpacks. These kids are used to having anyone who asks for their attention—their musicians, their movie makers, their TV stars, their game designers—work really hard to earn it. When what is being offered isn’t engaging, these students truly resent their time being wasted. In more and more of our schools, this group is quickly becoming the majority. The motto of this group? “Engage me or enrage me.”

While our schools and education system today deal with the first two groups reasonably well, the third group is a real challenge. In fact, for educators today, it is *the* challenge. “Engage me or enrage me,” these students demand. And believe me, they’re enraged.

But why? That’s a question that needs a good answer.

When I was a novice teacher in the late 1960s in New York City’s East Harlem, things were different. Yes, we had our college-bound students, our “doing timers,” and our dropouts. In fact, far too many dropouts. Certainly a lot of kids then were not engaged. Many of them were on drugs. Some were engaged in trying to affect society—it was a time of great turmoil and change—but many weren’t.

The big difference from today is this: the kids back then didn’t expect to be engaged by everything they did. There were no video games, no CDs, no MP3s—none of today’s special effects. Those kids’ lives were a lot less rich—and not just in money: less rich in media, less rich in communication, much less rich in creative opportunities for students outside of school. Many if not most of them never even knew what real engagement feels like.



But today, all kids do. All the students we teach have something in their lives that's really engaging—something that they do and that they are good at, something that has an engaging, creative component to it. Some may download songs; some may rap, lipsync, or sing karaoke; some may play video games; some may mix songs; some may make movies; and some may do the extreme sports that are possible with twenty-first-century equipment and materials. But they all do something engaging.

A kid interviewed for Yahoo's 2003 "Born to Be Wired" conference said: "I could have nothing to do, and I'll find something on the Internet." Another commented: "Every day after school, I go home and download music—it's all I do." Yet

may be a lot of things—including stressful—but it's certainly not unengaging.

Except in school.

And there it is so boring that the kids, used to this other life, just can't stand it.

"But school can be engaging," many educators will retort. "I don't see what is so much more engaging about this other life, other than the pretty graphics." To answer this, I recently looked at the three most popular (i.e., best-selling) computer and video games in the marketplace. They were, as of June 2004: *City of Heroes*, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game; *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Askaban*, an action game for the PlayStation 2; and *Rise*

"Explore..." "Take on your friends." "Exciting!" "Challenging!" "Master..." "Amass..." "Build..." "Perform..." "Research..." "Lead..." "Don't work alone."

Not exactly descriptions of today's classrooms and courses!

What's more, the games deliver on these promises. If they didn't, not only wouldn't they be best-sellers—they wouldn't get bought at all.

In school, though, kids don't have the "don't buy" option. Rather than being empowered to choose what they want ("Two hundred channels! Products made just for you!") and to see what interests them ("Log on! The entire world is at your fingertips!") and to create their own personalized identity ("Download your own ring tone! Fill your iPod with precisely the music you want!")—as they are in the rest of their lives—in school, they must eat what they are served.

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another added: "On the Internet, you can play games, you can check your mail, you can talk to your friends, you can buy things, and you can look up things you really like." Many of today's third-graders have multiple e-mail addresses. Today's kids with computers in their homes sit there with scores of windows open, IMing all their friends. Today's kids without computers typically have a video game console or a GameBoy. Life for today's kids

of Nations, a real-time strategy game for the PC. On their boxes and Web sites, these games promise the kids who buy and play them some very interesting experiences: "There's a place we can all be heroes." "The Dementors are coming, and this time Harry needs his friends." "The entire span of human history is in your hands."

Not exactly what we promise our kids in school.

And the descriptions of the games? "Create your own heroes." "Thrilling battles!" "Encounter..." "Engage..." "Fly..."

And what they are being served is, for the most part, stale, bland, and almost entirely stuff from the past. Yesterday's education for tomorrow's kids. Where is the programming, the genomics, the bioethics, the nanotech—the stuff of their time? It's not there. Not even once a week on Fridays.

That's one more reason the kids are so enraged—they know their stuff is missing!

But maybe, just maybe, through their rage, the kids are sending us another message as well—and, in so doing, offering us the hope of connecting with them.

Maybe—and I think that this is the case—today’s kids are challenging us, their educators, to engage them at their level, even with the old stuff, the stuff we all claim is so important, that is, the “curriculum.”

Maybe if, when learning the “old” stuff, our students could be continuously challenged at the edge of their capabilities, and

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could make important decisions every half-second, and could have multiple streams of data coming in, and could be given goals that they want to reach but wonder if they actually can, and could beat a really tough game and pass the course—maybe then they wouldn’t have to, as one kid puts it, “power down” every time they go to class.

In my view, it’s not “relevance” that’s lacking for this generation, it’s engagement. What’s the relevance of *Pokémon*, or *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, or *American Idol*? The kids will master systems ten times more complex than algebra, understand systems ten times more complex than the simple economics we require of them, and read far



Photo by Tay Rees/Getty Images. © 2005

above their grade level—when the goals are worth it to them. On a recent BBC show *Child of Our Time*, a four-year-old who was a master of the complex video game *Halo 2* was being offered so-called “learning games” that were light-years below his level, to his total frustration and rage.

The fact is that even if you are the most engaging old-style teacher in the world, you are not going to capture most of our students’ attention the old way. “Their short attention spans,” as one professor put it, “are [only] for the old ways of learning.” They certainly don’t have short attention spans for their games, movies, music, or Internet surfing. More and more, they just don’t tolerate the old ways—and they are enraged we are not doing better by them.

So we have to find how to present our curricula in ways that engage our students—not just to create new “lesson plans,” not even just to put the curriculum online. The BBC, for example, has been given £350 million by the British government to create a “digital curricu-

lum.” They have concluded that almost all of it should be game-based, because if it doesn’t engage the students, that will be £350 million down the tube, and they may not get a second chance. But they are struggling in this unfamiliar world.

So how can and should they—and we—do this? As with games, we need to fund, experiment, and iterate. Can we afford it? Yes, because ironically, creating engagement is not about those fancy, expensive graphics but rather about ideas. Sure, today’s video games have the best graphics ever, but kids’ long-term engagement in a game depends much less on what they see than on what they do and learn. In gamer terms, “gameplay” trumps “eye-candy” any day of the week.

And if we educators don’t start coming up with some damned good curricular gameplay for our students—and soon—they’ll all come to school wearing (at least virtually in their minds) the T-shirt I recently saw a kid wearing in New York City: “It’s Not ADD—I’m Just Not Listening!”

So hi there, I’m the tuned-out kid in the back row with the headphones. Are you going to engage me today or enrage me? The choice is yours. *e*