

“Engage Me or Enrage Me”

What Today’s Learners Demand

By Marc Prensky

[1774 words]

“Today’s kids are not ADD, they’re EOE”.
– Kip Leland, LA Virtual School

An anyone who’s 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 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 they offer isn’t engaging, these student’s 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 60’s 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 videogames, no CDs, no mp3’s, none of today’s special effects. Those kids’ life was a lot less rich – and not just in money. It was 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 of them do. Every single student we teach has *something* in his or her life that’s really engaging – something that they do, 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 21st 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 go school I go home and download music – it’s all I do.” Yet 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 email addresses. Today’s kids with computers in their homes sit there with scores of windows open, IM’ing all their friends. Today’s kids without computers typically have a videogame console or a GameBoy. Life for today’s

kids 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 Azkaban*, an action game for the PlayStation 2, and *Rise 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...” “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 (200 channels! Products made just for you!), to do and 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 I-pod with precisely the music you want!), as they are in the rest of their life, in school they must eat what they are served.

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, i.e. the “curriculum.”

Maybe if, when learning the “old” stuff, our students could *be* continuously challenged at the edge of their capabilities, and make important decisions every half second, and have multiple streams of data coming in, and be given goals that they want to reach but wonder if they can actually can, and 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 *America's 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, read far above their grade level – when the goals are worth it to them. On a recent BBC show “Child of our Time,” a 4-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 ways 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 curriculum.” They have concluded that almost all of it should be game-based, because if it doesn't engage the

students, it 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 the 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.

Marc Prensky is an internationally acclaimed thought leader, speaker, writer, consultant, and game designer in the critical areas of education and learning. He is the author of Digital Game-Based Learning (McGraw Hill, 2001) and the founder and CEO of Games2train, a game-based learning company, whose clients include IBM, Bank of America, Nokia, and the Department of Defense. He is also the founder of The Digital Multiplier, an organization dedicated to eliminating the digital divide in learning worldwide, and creator of the sites www.SocialImpactGames.com, www.DoDGameCommunity.com, and www.GamesParentsTeachers.com. Marc holds an MBA from Harvard and a Masters in Teaching from Yale. More of his writings can be found at www.marcprensky.com/writing/default.asp. Marc can be contacted at marc@games2train.com.