night before the test to achieve a pass-
ing grade and become at least some-
what successful students. Their motto: “We have learned to ‘play
school.”

3. The students who “tune us out.” These stu-
dents are convinced that school is to-
tally devoid of interest and totally ir-
relevant 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 of-
fered isn’t engaging, these students
truly resent their time being wasted.
In more and more of our schools, this
group is quickly becoming the major-
ity. The motto of this group? “Engage
me or enrage me.”

While our schools and education system
today deal with the first two groups rea-
sonably 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 en-
gaged 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 cre-
ative opportunities for students outside
of school. Many if not most of them
never even knew what real engagement
feels like.

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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ing worldwide.
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, lip-sync, 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

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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.

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 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 economies we require of them, and read far 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.

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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.