

CHAPTER 1

“The Teachers Got Me Into This”

Educational Skirmishes ... with a Pinch of Freedom

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What does *Ender's Game* tell us about the art of education, or pedagogy? And what on Earth does this have to do with freedom? To answer these questions, we need to step back in time. For thousands of years, people have debated the structure learning should take. For Socrates (469–399 BC), education was an interactive experience involving critical inquiry, dialogue, and a collaborative process that encouraged people to question the world around them by reasoning things out. Socrates left quite an impression on his students, most notably Plato (429–347 BC). Intermingling his own views with Socrates' in a long dialogue called the *Republic*, Plato envisioned education as the identification of natural skills of children with the aim of preparing them to take on roles in society that corresponded to their perceived abilities. Children gifted in the use of reasoning, for instance, would join the “guardians” and rule the state. For Plato, then, education would be highly selective, and would also train the young for their future work. In this regard, Plato emphasizes his own kind of vocational education, centering on training in a skill or trade to prepare for a career. While Socratic critical inquiry and Platonic “vocational prep” aren't exactly opposing philosophies of education, they do at times conflict with one another.

And this conflict returns us to Ender. In this chapter we'll consider what Ender's experiences tell us about the differences between liberal

education, vocational training, critical inquiry, and that elusive matter of freedom *in*, and as a result *of* education. Specifically, we'll address the following questions: Does everyone need a liberal education? Are schools training grounds for the workplace? And finally, is critical inquiry essential to being an educated person?

Liberal Education Is Paideia's Game

A liberal education is one that is meant to free or “liberate” a person's mind. It has nothing to do with being liberal or conservative in the way those terms are used in contemporary politics. A liberal education involves studying subjects such as mathematics, logic, ethics, aesthetics, music, poetry, rhetoric, and biology. In Plato's Athens, these subjects were known collectively as *paideia*, which, in a very general sense, means to educate. Yet *Ender's Game* devotes so much attention to non-liberal topics—the social life of Ender and his schoolmates, the interactive learning of the war games in the battleroom, and the individual problem solving in the virtual reality of the Giant's Drink—that it's easy to believe that Ender had very little liberal education at all.

Plato felt that vocational learning was important, but he also saw liberal education as complementing it. True education was a matter of balancing one's body and mind. When sketching the details of his ideal city-state in the *Republic*, Plato carefully described the military training of the rulers of the city: “The person who achieves the finest blend of music and physical training and impresses it on his soul in the most measured way is the one we'd most correctly call completely harmonious.”¹ Plato reasoned that learning music and poetry would inspire a more harmonious soul in soldiers, enhancing their courage and lessening their tendencies toward cruelty. Ultimately, for Plato, a well-balanced curriculum helps foster harmony in individuals and societies.

Support for liberal education has fluctuated over the years. Mortimer Adler (1902–2001) reasoned that everyone is owed a liberal education because “the best education for the best is the best education for all.”² Yet public schooling in the United States in the late twentieth century was riddled with problems in Adler's view, mainly due to low expectations. In his words, “A part of our population—and much too large a part—has harbored the opinion that many of the nation's children are not fully educable.”³ Unimpressed with the prevalent practice of

“tracking” learners according to their abilities, Adler argued that we have not “always been honest in our commitment to democracy and its promise of equality.”⁴ *The Paideia Proposal*, Adler’s 1982 manifesto, mapped out an alternative system in which every learner would study a blend of classically oriented courses for 12 years.

Alas, the future society of *Ender’s Game* does not follow *The Paideia Proposal*. Still, Ender does get a kind of liberal education with three core aspects. First, in terms of comprehension and performance, Ender learns about military history, military tactics, and strategic-oriented mathematical calculations in the classroom. Second, he develops problem-solving skills in the cyber-reality of the computer game, the Giant’s Drink. Third, in terms of interactive performance and cognition, Ender learns about hand-to-hand combat and command in the simulated war games of the battleroom. Though these three pieces of Ender’s education lend variety to the content and delivery of the Battle School curriculum, the variety is admittedly limited.

For Ender and his fellow trainees, Battle School is an intense, emotionally draining experience. Anderson warns Graff after Ender is promoted to the rank of Commander, “We want to teach him, not give him a nervous breakdown.”⁵ Anderson’s fear is well-founded. Competition is fierce and the pace is demanding. Children’s performances in the battleroom are ranked on a daily basis, and rankings are circulated for all to see. Battle School isn’t a place where children feel free to show or talk about their emotions. Dink observes, “That’s right, we never cry. I never thought of that. Nobody ever cries.”⁶ In this unforgiving setting, Ender has a series of violent entanglements with his peers, fights and arguments that he deeply regrets. “I’m doing it again, thought Ender. I’m hurting people again, just to save myself. Why don’t they leave me alone, so I don’t have to hurt them?”⁷ While Wiggin doesn’t initiate any of these conflicts, his lashing out often has fatal consequences.

Plato would likely chide Colonel Graff, saying that Battle and Command School fail to offer the sort of balanced curriculum called for in the *Republic*. Nowhere in Ender’s learning is there any poetry, music, or visual arts. Nowhere is there any learning about grammar, rhetoric, or biology. Graff would perhaps counter that education is a matter of *realpolitik*, pointing out that Ender didn’t need liberal education to lead Earth to victory.⁸ In response, Plato would counter that educating an army of soldiers who aren’t harmonious souls would lead to cruelty, which has wider social implications.

Vocational Prep: A Heaping Tablespoon, or the Main Dish?

Philosophers of education have argued that vocational training is an important part of education, but they're also conflicted about *how much* of a part it should be. If these thinkers were chefs, we might say that some call for a pinch of trade preparation while others believe it should be the main dish itself.

So where does this leave Ender? Wasn't his education entirely vocational? Certainly, Battle School is designed to select, stream, and ultimately train different types of soldiers for Earth's army. But, looking more closely, further questions spring to mind: What sort of vocational education did Ender experience? Was Ender's occupational training balanced with other subject areas? Was Ender simply compelled to follow orders and forego critical inquiry, or was he educated to develop his own strategies when faced with complex problems? In reaching for answers, we need to consider two versions of vocational learning, one put forward by Plato and another set out by thinkers concerned with what's called a "Taylorist" view of increasing social efficiency.

For Plato, a balanced education would mix vocational learning with a broad-based liberal education. On the vocational side, schools should identify the aptitudes of learners and sort them into different streams, which would eventually lead to different occupations. Curriculum—the content, depth, length, and method of one's studies—would be designed to match an individual's aptitudes and career path. Plato's choices for career paths are rather limited. He worked from the idea that children are predisposed by their natural proficiencies to enter one of three general classes, all of which are necessary to a harmonious society. These are the guardians, "auxiliaries" (or peace-keepers), and skilled producers of crafts. Some children are bound to become carpenters, others to become retailers, and still others—but only a select few—to become rulers. To sell this idea to the public we are given the "myth of the metals," a story told in Book III of the *Republic*. According to this myth, the natural aptitudes of children are spelled out by their souls, which contain different mixtures of gold, silver, and bronze. Each person is either dominantly gold (rulers), silver (auxiliaries), or bronze (artisans). Because the divine creator

made every citizen's soul out of alloys of all these substances, it's possible for families to include members of different classes. Plato felt that this myth should be told to people as a "noble lie," because some people would be dissatisfied with their place in society. But people aren't always the best judge of their own interests. Plato thus favored a fairly rigid class system in which people are trained according to their merit. This class system would lead to a society in which people are trained to do better what they can already do. Of course, the drawback is that Plato's state is one in which individuals can't *choose* their careers, and class mobility is severely limited.

Since the *Republic* first appeared over two millennia ago, Plato's ideas have been crucially influential on the way we think about schooling. "Plato laid down the fundamental principle of a philosophy of education," American educator John Dewey (1859–1952) observed, "when he asserted that it was the business of education to discover what each person is good for, and to train him to mastery of that mode of excellence."⁹

But some educators didn't think Plato's "heaping tablespoon" model for vocational learning went far enough. As public schools sprang up in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a heated debate arose between those who favored vocational training, those who supported a liberal education, and those who championed critical inquiry. In the first camp, a collective—or, perhaps "cartel" is a better word—of thinkers argued that the purpose of education is to enhance worker productivity.¹⁰ They felt that public schools should be designed to prepare children for the specific tasks of an industrial society.

Before delving further into this vocational-oriented view of education, we need to take a step back and consider "Taylorism." In the late nineteenth century, mechanical engineer F.W. Taylor looked at the manufacturing industry through a scientific lens. To enhance labor productivity he called for a greater degree of managerial control, tighter standardizations of practice, and more prescriptive forms of training.¹¹ Drawing from the ideas of "Taylorism," educators like W.W. Charters, Franklin Bobbitt, and David Snedden unleashed a flurry of rules, guidelines, and procedures to steer schooling away from a liberal curriculum's perceived frivolity.¹² Snedden argued that a vocational school must "reproduce practical processes, must give the pupil many hours of each working day in actual practical work, and

must closely correlate theoretical instruction to this practical work.”¹³ Like the budding soldiers in Battle School, children would listen to instructions, follow them, and memorize a range of workplace-oriented tasks through repetition. What children would *not* learn in this setting is how to critically question the world around them.

Is Battle School Just Trade School?

Does the I.F.’s Battle School aim to prepare its students for specific occupations? To increase their efficiency as soldiers, or to make them “well-rounded persons”? To answer these questions, let’s consider the purposes and organizational design of Battle School.

We’ll begin with the purpose of Battle School. Colonel Graff, the principal of the school, offers some useful remarks. While recruiting Ender, Graff says, “Battle School is for training future starship captains and commodores of flotillas and admirals of the fleet.”¹⁴ Later, when strolling with Ender from the shuttle to the school, Graff elaborates on this point, “My job is to produce the best soldiers in the world. In the whole history of the world.”¹⁵ Here, Graff provides us with the first part of Battle School’s mission statement: the school aims to train soldiers and produce an effective army.

But with a new phase of an interplanetary war looming on Earth’s horizon, there’s a second, more urgent, aspect to the mission. Graff later adds, “We need a Napoleon. An Alexander.... My job is to produce such a creature, and all the men and women he’ll need to help him.”¹⁶ Clearly, the Battle School aims to identify and develop a general who will be able to lead Earth to victory. And this aspect of the mission is personally significant for Ender, whom Graff expects to fulfill this very role. If we were to judge Battle School strictly by Graff’s mission statement, we’d say that it is specifically aimed at producing skills and, as such, is highly vocational in focus.

But does the design of Battle School correspond to its vocationally driven core purpose? Let’s begin with streaming, the process of directing learners along pathways: children enter Battle School when they’re five or six years old. They’re chosen based on observations gleaned from a vast surveillance network and a series of tests. Very few children are actually invited to attend Battle School, so in a sense streaming begins at birth. But further streaming occurs inside the

school itself. In terms of career pathways, Battle School is designed to continually assess and challenge learners, guiding them toward different occupations within Earth's army, all based on their perceived abilities. As Colonel Graff abrasively tells a group of incoming children, "Most of you are going to ice out. Get used to that, little boys. Most of you are going to end up in Combat School, because you don't have the brains to handle deep-space piloting."¹⁷ This statement harkens back to Plato's "myth of the metals." Maybe Graff had a copy of the *Republic* in his back pocket as he dressed down that group of newbies.

Ender advanced through the Battle School levels at a brisk pace, and was promoted from Launchie to Salamander Army at age six, two years ahead of any of his peers. Petra described the Salamander program as follows: "School for us isn't like it is for the Launchies. History and strategies and tactics and buggers and math and stars, things you'll need as a pilot or a commander."¹⁸ At this higher level, school is about military history, tactical-oriented mathematics, and strategizing. So it would seem that the army platoon curriculum of Battle School is entirely vocational in nature.

Should Critical Inquiry Be Socratic or Social?

As we've seen, Ender's education was, for the most part, vocational. It involved an unhealthy dose of deception and surveillance, as Colonel Graff constantly manipulated Ender's social settings, friendships, and competitive interactions. But what sort of critical inquiry, if any, was involved in Battle and Command Schools, and how important was it for Ender's learning? Critical thinking encourages thought processes rooted in rigorous and reliable procedures of inquiry.¹⁹ When the critical inquirer encounters ideas, she poses questions that help her to "identify faulty arguments, hasty generalizations, assertions lacking evidence, truth claims based on unreliable authority, ambiguous or obscure concepts, and so forth."²⁰ Let's consider two versions of critical inquiry.

As we've seen, Socrates treated thoughtful verbal exchange as integral to critical inquiry. Believing himself to be ignorant, he went about ancient Athens asking questions of others in an attempt to collaboratively reason things out. He examined a wide variety of

important topics: justice, courage, love, piety, wisdom, and friendship. The technique of posing questions to test the validity of others' claims to know the truth is still today known as the "Socratic method." The version of critical inquiry demonstrated by Socrates' dialogues could be defined as an interactive, question-driven process of reasoning things out.

Critical inquiry can also be the key to *freedom* in the eyes of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1921–1997). In a schoolroom dominated by a teacher's agenda, students are treated as though they're empty containers to be filled with knowledge. Freire called this the "banking" view of education, where teachers provide, lead, and control while students receive, follow, and are controlled. To liberate people from this "teacher–student contradiction," Freire called for students as well as teachers to pose and investigate *real problems*. Through problem posing, "the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach."²¹ Problem posing, in Freire's view, also leads students to become "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own."²² For Freire, critical inquiry is both a result of, and an essential component of liberation.

Critical Inquirer for the Dead

While attending Battle and Command School, Ender faced a variety of complex open-ended tasks that required some critical thinking. These critical inquiries center on the Giant's Drink game and the battleroom.

During his free time, Ender often played a virtual reality game that presented him with a series of puzzles. Because of Ender's actions, the Giant's Drink initially transformed into Fairyland and later into the End of the World. The parameters and objectives of the game regularly shifted as the computer responded to Ender's strategies. As Major Imbu described it, "The mind game is a relationship between the child and the computer. Together they create stories. The stories are true, in the sense that they reflect the reality of the child's life."²³

This way of developing both the learner and the curriculum at the same time would certainly appeal to Socrates. But over time, the perplexing nature of the game confounded Ender:

Ender did not understand how the game functioned anymore. In the old days, before he had first gone to the End of the World, everything was combat and puzzles to solve—defeat the enemy before he kills you, or figure out how to get past the obstacle. Now, though, no one attacked, there was no war, and wherever he went, there was no obstacle at all.²⁴

The individualized design of the Giant's Drink game invites multiple and varied experiences of critical inquiry. The open-endedness of the game invites Ender to solve complex problems through unconventional means. Unfortunately, the solitary nature of the game contrasts with the interactive and social emphasis placed on learning by both Socrates and Freire.

The rules of the battleroom may also inspire critical inquiry. They exist in a state of flux, and so reflect the unpredictable nature of life. When Ender is promoted to commander, for instance, his team's schedule is accelerated dramatically. Sometimes they face multiple challenges in a day, something unheard of at Battle School. Additionally, the challenges intensified, as Ender's opponents sometimes outnumbered his own team significantly. The teachers' flippant disregard for battleroom routines angered Ender, who "didn't like games where the rules could be anything and the objective was known to them alone."²⁵

Although the constantly shifting parameters prompted Ender to further develop his skills as a soldier and commander, his feelings of frustration grew. When he was offered a space at Command School, these feelings motivated him to take a leave of absence and return to Earth. When Valentine, his trusted sister, encouraged him to return to his studies, Ender tersely replied: "They aren't studies, they're games. All games, from beginning to end, only they change the rules whenever they feel like it." He holds up a limp hand. "See the strings?"²⁶ Later, an exasperated Ender states, "I've spent my life as someone's pawn."²⁷ It seems that the unpredictable nature of the battleroom – and Battle School itself – made Ender feel powerless and manipulated, a resounding echo of Freire's worries about teacher domination.

Does the battleroom actually offer experiences of critical inquiry? Somewhat. While Freire would undoubtedly question whether the

challenges Ender faced as a commander were reasonable, both Freire and Socrates would applaud the teachers' integration of social learning into this component of the school's curriculum. The fact that the rules (or lack thereof) in the battleroom tasks are reserved for teachers alone to determine, though, conflicts with Freire's belief that learners should have a say in curriculum construction. He would be concerned about the undemocratic nature of this teacher-student relationship. Card writes:

And the despair filled him again. Now he knew why. Now he knew what he hated so much. He had no control over his own life. They ran everything. They made all the choices. Only the game was left to him, that was all, everything else was them and their rules and plans and lessons and programs, and all he could do was go this way or that way in battle.²⁸

Ultimately, Freire would be unsurprised with the escalating personal struggle that Ender has with his own education.

Educational Skirmishes

Imagine that we invited the philosophers mentioned in this chapter to visit Battle and Command School, perhaps on "Meet-the-Teacher Night." We've somehow transported Socrates, Plato, Mortimer Adler, and Paulo Freire through space and time to examine Ender's situation. What would they think? While Plato would be happy with the vocational foundation of the curriculum, he would be unimpressed with the absence of a liberal education. For him, the I.F.'s training schools would be developing individuals who don't have harmonious souls and are inclined to cruelty. The relative lack of liberal education would, of course, trouble Adler greatly. We'd expect to hear from him some very sharp comments regarding the implications of creating a society that favors specialization over generalization and empowers certain specializations over others.

After engaging Graff in a delightful question-and-answer about the core meaning of war or justice, Socrates would probably express his concern with the lack of dialogic learning. The sort of thinker Graff would produce, for Socrates, would fail to be an active inquirer who lives a reflective, "examined life." While Paulo Freire would be pleased

with the amount and variety of problem posing at the two schools, he'd also express his grave concern with the undemocratic relationship between teachers and learners. Such an unbalanced power dynamic forces students learn under a relationship of domination, and quietly encourages them to perpetuate that domination.

Ender's learning experiences illustrate how vocational learning, liberal education, and critical inquiry can coexist, but as conflicting pedagogies. Battle and Command School offered experiences that were predominantly vocational in nature, and their liberal curriculum was virtually non-existent. The degree to which Ender experienced critical inquiry really depends on whose definition we use. As we have seen, *Ender's Game* illustrates just how different views of pedagogy can intermingle and conflict with one another. It also demonstrates how these conflicting pedagogies deeply affect the growth of both individuals and society.²⁹

Notes

1. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, revised by C.D.C. Reeve (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 1992), 88.
2. Mortimer Adler, *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 7.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game* (New York: TOR Books, 1991), 173.
6. Ibid., 109.
7. Ibid., 115.
8. For more insight into *realpolitik* and the politics of Graff and the Enderverse, see the chapter by Ted Henry Brown and Christie L. Maloyed in this book.
9. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1916), 309.
10. See R.E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
11. Ibid.
12. See H.M. Kliebard, "The Rise of Scientific Curriculum Making and Its Aftermath," *Curriculum Theory*, 5:1 (1975): 27–38.
13. David Snedden, "Fundamental Distinctions between Liberal and Vocational Education," *Curriculum Inquiry*, 7:1 (1977): 51.
14. Card, *Ender's Game*, 20.

15. Ibid., 34.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 32.
18. Ibid., 79.
19. Nicholas C. Burbules and Rupert Berk, "Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits," in Thomas S. Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler, eds., *Critical Theories in Education* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 45–66.
20. Ibid., 46.
21. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York, NY: Continuum, 1970), 80.
22. Ibid., 81.
23. Card, *Ender's Game*, 121.
24. Ibid., 140–141.
25. Ibid., 261.
26. Ibid., 236.
27. Ibid., 312.
28. Ibid., 151.
29. The author would like to thank Kevin Decker and Michael Potter for their astute guidance.