Ender's Game Discussion Guide

Background: It perhaps unusual that a hugely popular work of science fiction would be included on the Marine Corps PME Reading List. While this book is aimed at Privates through Lance Corporals and Officer Candidates/Midshipmen, more experienced Marines can get a lot out of reading it. Ender's Game is more than about the difficulty and excitement that competition provides in preparing for combat. There are lessons in training methodology, leadership, and ethics as well. Such richness in range and treatment has made Card's book an oft-read and re-read title for many years; Ender's Game has been a stalwart item on the Marine Corps Reading List since its inception.

1. **What are the authors' mission (task and purpose) and central thesis in writing this book?**

Card's introduction provides a number of potential answers for the discussion group to grapple with. Major points include: (1) showing timeless ways leaders are able to make a unique impact on a group of people, strongly influencing their performance in war; (2) cover the challenges of training people in tactical problem-solving in the confusion of combat; (3) perhaps most controversially, the book "channels" the feelings, frustrations, strivings, and dilemmas that budding junior leaders (typically not as young as the children in Card's book but still young enough) experience as they "grow up" in the military. Additionally, Card's introduction suggests why Ender's Game was initially placed on the Marine Corps PME Reading List; then Captain John Schmitt, author of FMFM-1 Warfighting (a foundational book on Marine maneuver warfare doctrine, now published as MCDP 1) used it to teach.

2. **What part of the book was the most effective in accomplishing the authors' mission? What part of the book was the least effective?**

The discussion facilitator should expect that the group will have great difficulty reaching consensus on this issue, if only because various parts of the book will resonate more with some than with others, based on past experience of the readers. Those with merely high school recently behind them may relate to the social loneliness of the new battle school students and the need to prove themselves. There is also a strong team sports component as well—those so involved will naturally gravitate to what makes an outstandingly successful team so extraordinary.   The personality of various army leaders—from Bonzo Madrid to Rose the Nose—will also remind Marines/Midshipmen/Candidates of personalities they have known in the past. Regarding what is least effective, discussion may lead to the end of the book where Ender and his subordinates think they are fighting a simulated enemy in a networked computer game but are, actually, fighting a real

enemy through heavily automated command and control. For some in the group, this is seen as an ultimate technological goal and for others such a concept is not desired as it will take the necessary horror out of warfare.   While there is value in discussing the ethics of either position, it distracts from the author's purposes regarding coaching, teaching, training, and leading a successful team in a competitive situation.

For those with combat experience, the limitations of the book will come home to roost here. While training is necessarily bloodless in purpose if not in fact (despite Colonel Graff's admonition that "little boys have died in Battle School before"), students never deal with what real fear--so endemic to close quarters fighting—does to individuals and units. This is true even when the dreaded war with the Bugs actually comes to pass.

3. **What do the authors assume to be true in order to accomplish the mission? Do the authors validate these assumptions in the book?**

Since this is a work of fiction, the discussion group may be reluctant to come to grips with these questions. With a bit of coaxing and quoting from Card's introduction, the discussion facilitator can generate comments regarding how fiction sometimes gives us insight into essential characteristics of human nature—this is, after all, what makes great fiction authors so great. A good line of questioning might be as follows: (1) Do the characters seem believable to you? Why? (2) Are the interactions and situations of these characters believable given "suspension of disbelief" required to enjoy such a novel? (3) Do you feel you gained any insight into the probabilities and possibilities of human nature from this story? (4) Is any of this insight useful to you in learning about the military? In understanding why you are trained the way you are? In comprehending how to excel in such an environment?

Either at this point or at another, some of the discussion participants will point out that Ender is an exceptional individual and question whether he is a role model to follow or not. It would be worth the time invested to allow the group to address this issue. While Ender is perhaps idealized, participants may be able to seize on bits and pieces of this ethos and methods that help them in their particular situations dealing with their specific challenges. Even if participants cannot be exactly like Ender, the contributions of others who are not as good as Ender are still necessary for success and can nevertheless inspire readers to strive for excellence.

4. **The part of the book that is most relevant to what I / we do is:**

Much will depend on the billets/specialties and current concerns/worries of those in the discussion groups. In order to keep discussion focused and productive, the discussion leader may want to guide comments along one or more of the following threads:

Followership: What does the book tell us about being a good follower? Ender is not always a leader; he spends much of the beginning of the book being a follower. There are other followers who eventually become leaders—what sets them apart? What is it about being a good follower that made them effective leaders?

Leadership: How many different kinds of leaders can you find in the book? What advantages and disadvantages do they have? What is it about the most effective leaders in the story that seems to set them above the rest of the pack? Does this reflect your experience? How do we define leadership and evaluate some of the leaders in the book such as Colonel Graff, Mazer Rackham, Bonzo Madrid, Rose the Nose, Petra, Bean, Peter, and Valentine?

Training and team-building: What is different about how Battle School does training and education than what we see in the military? Why is this? What features of military training and education should be in Battle School? What features in Battle School should be in the military? How is conflict between leaders and followers, between leaders, and between followers handled? What seems to be the glue that holds cohesive teams together and makes them effective inside and outside the Battle Room? What tears teams apart?

Maneuver Warfare/Tactics: What is it about Ender's method that contributes to his tactical success in and outside of the Battle Room? Why do other armies and leaders fail when he succeeds? Card has much to say about the role of "extra practice," trust between leaders and team members, innovation, and non-formulaic approaches/ unpredictability.

Inflicting and handling stress: Colonel Graff and Mazer Rackham both inflict stress in ways that raise some ethical questions regarding what can versus what should be introduced as "stress" on those undergoing military training. What seems right and why? What seems wrong—and why? What do the participants think of Mazer Rackham's observation that "There is no teacher but the enemy?" How should students react to this?

5. **Identify the authors' specific and implied conclusions.** Given the topical segmentation provided above, it should be relatively easy to arrive at these in the course of answering Questions in 4—difference between specific and implied conclusions can be downplayed by the discussion facilitator:

Followership: Pay attention and be a team player. Followership still takes skills—perishable skills—which must be continually honed. Followers can help solve problems for leaders. Be ready to lead when given the chance or when circumstances thrust it upon you. Remember in such cases what it is to be a follower—and that, even as a leader, one is still a follower of some still higher leader.

Leadership: Colonel Graff, Mazer Rackham, Bonzo Madrid, Rose the Nose, Petra, Bean, and even Pete, and Valentine provide widely differing examples of leadership and leadership effectiveness. What sets Ender apart is that he excels in every kind of situation he is handed, without fail—only Rackham possibly compares with him, but readers don't get that kind of exposure to know for sure.

Training and team-building: Competition is indispensable—both individual and team competition. It keeps everyone sharp at all times and focuses concentration. Rules and situations are continuously and unpredictably changed—and this is no excuse for failure. Will to win, energy, creative approaches, and leadership all play a part in success. Conflicts between personalities are not coddled, they are practically encouraged in a "socially Darwinistic" way so that the best emerge from the pack. Successful leaders can deal constructively with differences and yet forge strong, adaptive teams.

Maneuver Warfare/Tactics: Ender, his toon leaders, and his army teaches themselves and continually try new things. Huge emphasis on technical mastery, unpredictability, mutual trust, and an ability to balance initiative and teamwork. Everyone has something important to contribute and army members feel it, believe in it. Higher level OODA functioning—superior speed and qualitative decentralized decision-making—is the hallmark of Ender's method.

Inflicting and handling stress: Expect some discussion on the difference between training and hazing—why "the harassment package" is a necessary component when given real and tangible meaning but that respect for all members at all times is essential . Leaders are critical in keeping a natural tendency for hazing at bay— Bonzo Madrid's style when leading Salamander Army is a good contrasting case.

6a. With respect to the authors' conclusions (either specified or implied), I / we accept or agree with the following: While there may be minor disagreement on the specifics, the discussion facilitator can expect general agreement on conclusions regarding followership, leadership, training and teambuilding, and possibly even on tactics and maneuver warefare. The role of stress will be the most contentious.

6b. With respect to the authors' conclusions (either specified or implied), I / we reject or do not agree with the following: Expect that the situations—deliberately or accidentally contrived by Battle School staff—where actual physical violence is not only possible, but probable, to be the lightning rod of discussion here. The violent confrontation with Bonzo Madrid in the shower is perhaps the most problematic for the reader. There are other instances where physical fights between students—even between teachers and students (e.g., Mazer Rackham and Ender)--are essential to the story and the development of Ender as a warrior and leader. The question for discussion group participants will be whether this is essential to the development of a warfighter or not. How might the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP) and other service-sponsored contact sports (e.g., boxing smokers) be seen in this light? Is this enough to overcome the lack of physical fear in team competition/conflict situations such as what combat veteran participants may feel is missing in the book?

7a. This book made a favorable impression on me and it will change the way I approach: The below are some topics the discussion group should come up with—there may be others.

The utility of reading selected fiction in professional development. The Marine Corps Reading List has a number of works of fiction. The group may discuss what makes fiction reading useful—and what sort of fiction is therefore not useful. For more senior readers/discussion group participants, Ender's Game provides useful allegories to explain why militaries do what they do in a particularly effective shorthand way.

Training. This may not be immediately obvious to officer candidates, midshipmen, and the newly graduated enlisted Marine, but the importance of force-on-force free-play exercises to develop tactical problem-solving, innovation, and leadership is stressed throughout the book. Formulaic training in technique and procedure only goes so far—while it's necessary, it is far from being enough. Expect some of the more seasoned Lance Corporals to possibly bring this up for discussion, especially those that are bored with just "doing the basics" and never getting beyond that—or those who hunger to get more responsibility.

Stress and Leadership. "Taking Care of the Troops" isn't the same as coddling them. First –class training is everything—and morale goes up when the team legitimately and creditably feels like it is better than the other teams out there. The leader as coach is essential to get the team to work through the stress in practice sessions; the leader as example is critical to get the team through severe stress in the midst of execution during conflict. The book also shows Ender and others cracking jokes during some of the most stressful of times, reinforcing how important maintaining a sense of humor is in adversity—even if the "black humor" of a veteran infantryman!

7b. **This book made an unfavorable impression for the following reasons:** There are a number of situations in the book that will make some uncomfortable:

Repeated situations where physical violence is required to resolve situations and is seemingly necessary for Ender's development may turn off some discussion group participants. Key instances are the Stilson incident before Ender goes to Battle School, the scuffle between Ender and another boy on the launch, to Battle School, Bonzo beating on Ender when Ender is in Salamander Army, the climactic confrontation between Ender and Bonzo, Mazer thumping on Ender when he first reports in to him.

The cold utilitarianism of Colonel Graff and Major Anderson in inflicting increasing levels of stress on Ender and others in and out of the Battle Room and even Battle School. While Mazer Rackham is given only a little exposure at the end of the book, the initial meeting between him and Ender can suggest that he would be the same way as well.

8. **Recommended Additional Reading:** These are other works of fiction on the Marine Corps Reading List that reinforce some aspects of Card's book:

Elbert Hubbard. A Message To Garcia.

C.S. Forester. Rifleman Dodd and The General.

Steven Pressfield. Gates of Fire.

Antony Myrer. Once an Eagle.

Submitted by: E.M.Walters