



Civilian versus military schooling: is military education "higher"?

military-Earth thinking notebook

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In its ability to accept and even encourage pure criticism, whether positive or negative, military education differs positively, according to the author, from civilian education in its capacity for improvement and transformation. For him, the army implements a form of This is achieved through "real-edukation", by being open-minded, constantly adapting and pragmatic; also by questioning commonly accepted and comfortably consensual patterns.

Potache... the term characterizes the French officer so well when he goes to training school that it seems to be a synonym for student-military! I can well imagine the difficulties that the instructor may experience at Saint Cyr, at the Staff College or at the War College: how to educate these demanding, insolent, dissatisfied and grumpy students? No doubt by not forgetting that they are just as enthusiastic, collective, demanding for themselves, having at heart to improve the training for their successors?

In my opinion, the military education system is superior to the civilian system in the sense that it knows how to tolerate and use all the critical capacity, both positive and negative, of its students. My passage through civilian higher education leads me to say that it is difficult to be purely critical and that there is a form of immobility and exclusive positive thinking.

Thus, it is indeed a form of "real-edukation" that military education offers by being open-minded, constantly adapting, being pragmatic and questioning commonly accepted and comfortably consensual patterns.

There are certainly substantial advantages to civilian education that the military cannot or should not transpose to its own school system. However, certain military skills and reflexes are undeniable assets in building quality education. And it is paradoxically through its ability to tolerate criticism that the "great mute", in my opinion, makes the difference with the civilian world.

The comparison of two such different systems is an exercise in thinking in circles. In one case, one learns a trade to make, sell, manage resources, and in the other it is about learning how to wage war. What criteria should we use to compare them? It is therefore necessary to focus on the spirit of pedagogical projects and the modelling of teaching without dwelling on diametrically opposed educational goals and issues.

In this spirit, two parameters characterize civilian schools and draw the content of their training upwards. These are competitiveness and profitability: two characteristics that are difficult, if not dangerous, to transpose into military curricula.

Apart perhaps from the ranking of hospitals, according to the number of magazines printed, nothing seems to be of more interest to the French than the ranking of the grandes écoles and the diplomas they award. This ranking creates a strong competition between schools. Academic level, proximity to companies, international outlook, remuneration on leaving. All the criteria are set up to offer the student client an informed choice. This competitiveness is excellent in itself since it pushes the management to offer the best training to students in order to attract them. For example, it will make it easier to eliminate a disappointing course in order to find a more suitable training course. Schools are also obliged to ensure that they innovate and offer curricula that are increasingly in line with students' needs. However, this competition has its Achilles' heel, which consists in offering only an attractive showcase, a saleable product, without reforming the substance of the training, which is not visible and yet gives it its consistency. We will come back to this later.

The other criterion structuring civil schooling is the necessary profitability of the training offered. And this profitability can be understood in two senses: on the one hand, as an opportunity for employment after leaving school and, on the other hand, as a match between training and the prerequisites for future employment. Here again, schools are obliged by necessity to adapt to the market and it is therefore a positive dynamic that transforms and adapts training. Contacts with future employers are numerous. For example, at the Institut supérieur de l'aéronautique et de l'espace, the decision to open a new specialized master's degree is taken after having reviewed the curriculum. an ad hoc committee made up precisely of future employers (Airbus, CNES, aeronautical SMEs, etc.) who will have given their opinion on the essential modules and their expectations. This mutual trust between the schools and the business sector favours hiring at the end of the course. This notion of profitability is, of course, difficult to transpose to the army. But could we not imagine such training evaluation and steering committees? I remember that, as a unit commander, I was asked to assess in four lines the adequacy between the training received by lieutenants and housing marshals and their results in the field. It seems to me that this is largely insufficient and that we need to go further, and therefore copy the idea of these committees by putting around the same table representatives of regiments, staffs and training schools to encourage them to model the best of the curriculum together.

However, even if competitiveness and profitability cannot bring as much dynamism to military education as they do to civilian schools, military schools can take advantage of specific know-how and reflexes that give them a singular added value.

It is not easy to build up a quality education. However, the armed forces can rely on operational habits that can be directly transferred to the civilian sector: feedback and the preparation of replacements.

During my Master's degree, I was marked by the reluctance of my civilian comrades to fill in the module evaluation forms. It seems to me that this military reflex (RETEX), which seems natural in our environment, is not effective enough in the civilian world. Fear of engaging in criticism, indifference to successors, intellectual laziness, the explanation may be complex. However, by default of RETEX, the training can at best only improve because it is based only on the feelings of the faculty. Reactive adaptation is therefore non-existent, whereas I believe I have observed in my military training a great capacity for questioning modules because of the feedback from students.

A parameter closely linked to feedback, the military reflex of taking special care of "relief" significantly improves the training courses. Every student and every teacher is aware that he or she is only passing through and that part of his or her mission is to prepare for the next promotion. It has therefore often happened to me that I have drawn up instruction files that are more substantial than necessary, having at heart to put my successor in the best possible conditions to continue the mission. And yet this is not a written rule. I must say that sometimes (rarely) I have suffered from a lack of instructions. But it is the strength of the army to feel this responsibility towards the future, linked to the notion of the body, which I did not find in my civilian training. We should certainly not speak of selfishness, but rather of a lack of awareness of this responsibility that commits a student, and that should push him to "work for his young people", according to the consecrated expression.

But it is above all in its ability to accept criticism of its training that the military institution stands out.

Useful criticism is not only tolerated, but also encouraged through the evaluation process we have already described. This is a remarkable paradox for an army that is mistakenly labelled as being very dumb and that needs to be analysed in greater detail.

By way of illustration, I could testify to my incomprehension at the refusal of criticism during my time in civilian education. Accustomed to being asked to give a constructive opinion, I therefore took the same liberty of tone when evaluating training. But, in front of me, I met above all timid teams, adept at positive thinking at all costs, whose aim was to justify the relevance of what existed without deeply and usefully questioning it. Wanting to encourage feedback from my peers, I decided to publish a RETEX sheet for my comrades with three columns: positive points, negative points, suggestions for change. And now I am being reproached for talking about the negative, suggesting that two columns (positive points - suggestions for improvement) would have been more...diplomatic... This attitude is not constructive. It illustrates a refusal and a fear of facing reality. And I am pleased to belong to an institution that knows how to tolerate this contradiction, which I imagine is very uncomfortable for those in charge of training, but which is fundamental to improving teaching programmes and curricula.

It is also a strength to have a "non-professional" and often even "appointed" faculty to provide training supervision. They do not feel they have a special status. They know they are passing through and do not defend a system. The best lecturers in my master's programme will have been industrialists who came to present their field of expertise and not actors of the educational system. The War School trainee does not need an expert in the operational planning method (DFO), but he will always prefer to have a tutor who will be able to testify to his operational experience to illustrate the planning method. It is in this sense that the non-professionalization of the faculty is a strength.

Finally, the military offers a form of "real-education" to its students, compared to my experience in the civilian world. By analogy with realpolitik, which is in principle a very

diplomatic management of peace, based on making decisions with as much knowledge as possible and safeguarding as many options as possible, "real-edukation" is a form of "real-edukation".real-edukation" would be a vision of education that would allow us to move away from ideals and (comfortable) educational standards to deal with reality, and in particular the contradiction emanating from the students. This is the real paradox, then, of seeing the army tolerate contradiction in order to deal with reality, when it is often accused of being immobile, while deploring the lack of critical freedom in civilian training.

Confessing a great ability to criticize, and often in an acute manner, the training received during my military course, an ability however widely shared with my fellow officers, I did not fully realize that we were finally rendering a very singular service to the army, allowing it to make the difference with civilian training! So may we always criticize and keep this spirit of the military that is pulling forward!

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