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Difficult, but Fun: Reclaiming Joyful Formation in the Age of AI

Wonchul Shin, *Villanova University*

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I am writing this blog post with my 8-year-old daughter's voice still ringing in my ears: "Yes—it's difficult, but it's fun." As a student, she said it during a violin lesson after wrestling with a new bow technique. Anyone who has practiced an instrument may know the scene—scales repeated until fingers ache, a teacher correcting the same motion for the tenth time. We often tell our children (and our students as well), "Practice makes perfect," but the road to perfection is slow, repetitive, and occasionally tedious.

My daughter's shy voice—"difficult, but fun"—captures what philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre calls an *internal good*: a genuine joy experienced only inside a repetitive practice. External goods certainly loom large in my daughter's world—a coveted seat in the district orchestra, a résumé line that thrills her parents. For her, slow and repetitive practice is "difficult": she may desire a "shortcut" to finish practice quickly and play with her friends. And yet, in the middle of that drudgery, she found a deeper joy: the quiet thrill of coaxing one clear note from stubborn strings. Here, (slow) formation, not (fast) efficiency aimed at external validation, is the point.

Technologists assure us that artificial intelligence will free us from menial work so we can focus on more meaningful and creative work. When I asked ChatGPT about its educational role, it offered the usual optimism, focusing on efficiency:

AI can be a powerful tool to enhance human productivity and creativity. Rather than replacing us, it can augment our abilities, making work more fulfilling. In this way, AI doesn't just make life easier—it helps us reimagine what work means and empowers us to spend more time on what truly matters.

The pronoun *us* jumped out at me. AI speaks as though it already shares human aims. But does it grasp what makes learning formative rather than merely efficient?

Let us picture a humanities classroom. Reading primary texts—Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, for instance—often feels like violin practice: dense, slow, and sometimes tedious. A student can now upload the text, prompt an AI for a synopsis, and receive an instant outline. Hours saved, concepts clarified, quiz scores boosted—external goods secured.

Yet that shortcut bypasses *the internal good of reading* itself. Linger over a paragraph is not wasted time; it *is* the learning. More importantly, as we read, the text also reads *us*: a paragraph questions an unspoken assumption, an unfamiliar idea enlarges imagination, a story strangely mirrors our own. None of that occurs when we outsource reading to the so-called “efficient” AI.

When we reframe reading as a powerful practice of formation, tedium turns into joy. While we move through the words, we are simultaneously *moved by* them—seen, challenged, and reshaped by voices from centuries ago or a continent away. Out of that slow interaction emerges the joy of reading for its own sake. It becomes an interior reward that resists quick translation into productivity metrics.

Such formation extends well beyond the classroom. Someone who once wrestled patiently with Aristotle may later join a neighborhood book club simply for the pleasure of shared discovery. The capacity to be transformed by texts—through a time-consuming, attention-demanding encounter—is a deeply *human gift* that no algorithm can replicate.

On the other hand, from a social ethics perspective, I am concerned about the issue of accessibility to this formative dimension of education. As AI more embeds itself in education, the formative joys of slow learning might risk becoming a privilege. Students juggling multiple jobs or heavy caregiving duties are the ones who would be more tempted to outsource reading to generative AI tools. If engagement is priced in hours only the well-resourced can spare, we reinforce inequities that we, as educators, claim to resist.

Although we continue to work on this challenge, it is crucial for us as educators to foreground formation—particularly communal formation—in our pedagogy. Yes, AI can be a powerful tool. And it can help students in many ways. For example, AI may serve as a tutor, offering personalized learning experiences. Nevertheless, we need to re-claim the distinct human gift in the slow, shared process of learning. It is the dimension of education that makes us who we are, as individuals and communities, and that AI simply cannot provide. *Yes, it is difficult, but fun!*

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