



Tamkine Tribune

Perhaps We Have Glorified Effort a Little Too Much

We have to admit that we have developed an almost emotional attachment to effort. We like it long, visible, demanding and, if possible, slightly painful. Work completed quickly can sometimes make us suspicious. A simple solution may seem almost too easy to be truly deserving. And when someone manages to do in two hours what used to take eight, we are still torn between admiring their efficiency and wondering whether, somehow, they have cheated a little. By constantly associating difficulty with merit, we have gradually come to believe that the more something costs us, the more valuable it must be.

At school, this logic takes root very early. The serious student is often the one who spends long hours working, fills pages of notebooks, starts over, memorizes, repeats, perseveres and rarely complains about the effort involved. Such perseverance absolutely deserves recognition. Yet we ask far less often another question, one that is just as important: was all that effort actually necessary? One student may spend three hours memorizing a concept they have never truly understood, while another spends thirty minutes looking for a different explanation, asking for help, using a diagram, a video, a simulation or a digital tool, and ends up understanding the concept far more deeply. Which one has actually learned better? The fact that this question still makes us hesitate says a great deal about how instinctively we measure effort in hours, fatigue and difficulty, rather than in the intelligence of the method used.

This paradox becomes particularly obvious the moment we leave the classroom. In the professional world, someone who automates a repetitive task is not usually reprimanded for lacking courage; they are praised for saving time. Someone who designs a better process is not asked to return to the slower, more cumbersome method in the name of merit. Asking an experienced colleague for advice is not considered an intellectual weakness, and using a powerful tool is hardly seen as a moral failure. We call that efficiency. Fortunately so. It would be rather absurd to ask an architect to give up design software because “real architects used to draw everything by hand,” or to tell an accountant to abandon spreadsheets in order to prove that they genuinely understand arithmetic.

And yet education still sometimes carries a certain nostalgia for difficulty. We continue, consciously or not, to assume that simplifying a task means impoverishing it, that using a tool means avoiding learning, or that a result



achieved through struggle must somehow be worth more than one achieved intelligently. This is precisely the mindset that artificial intelligence is now forcing us to confront. The concern is understandable: if a machine can write, calculate, translate, summarize or explain in seconds, what becomes of learning? But perhaps the question should also be reversed. If a machine can now perform certain mechanical tasks almost instantly, do we really want to continue measuring human intelligence by our ability to reproduce those same tasks laboriously?

The real educational challenge, therefore, is no longer simply whether a student uses a tool. It is what that student is capable of doing with it. Do they understand the answer they have received? Can they identify an error, compare different options, reformulate, argue, contextualize or verify a piece of information? Do they know when to use a tool and, even more importantly, when not to trust it? These abilities require effort too, but a different kind of effort: less mechanical, more intellectual, more critical, and arguably far closer to what young people will genuinely need in the years ahead. Using a tool intelligently is not the same as avoiding effort. It is learning to invest effort where it creates the greatest value.

Perhaps this is where we need to reconsider our definition of merit. Merit does not necessarily lie in spending ten hours on a task that could reasonably take two. It may also lie in identifying a better method, asking for help at the right moment, abandoning an ineffective approach, or recognizing that repeating the same strategy four times without success is not always admirable perseverance. Sometimes it is simply stubbornness wearing a very respectable outfit. A modern education system should therefore teach not only persistence, but also the judgment to know when a different path is needed.

None of this means that we should dream of an education without effort. Real learning takes time, patience, repetition and, at times, a healthy amount of frustration. Reading requires concentration, mastering mathematics requires practice, learning a language means repeating oneself, and developing any complex skill inevitably involves mistakes, uncertainty and moments of discouragement. Effort remains essential. What needs to be questioned is not effort itself, but our tendency to treat it as a virtue regardless of whether it is useful. Not every difficulty is educational, not every repetition is formative, and not every form of exhaustion is evidence of genuine learning.

Perhaps we should therefore teach young people much earlier to question the way they work. Why am I doing this in this particular way? Is there a more effective method? Have I genuinely understood, or am I simply memorizing? Am I progressing, or am I merely exhausting myself? These may sound like questions of



technique, but they are ultimately questions of autonomy. Because education worthy of the name should not merely produce young people who can work hard when instructed to do so; it should help form individuals capable of deciding which efforts are worth making, and which ones need to be reconsidered.

For a long time, we have told young people that success requires hard work. The statement is not wrong, but it is incomplete. In a world where tools are evolving, knowledge circulates faster, and intelligence increasingly means knowing how to choose, verify, collaborate and decide, working harder will not always be enough. We will also need to learn to work better. Perhaps that is what education should now add to its traditional notion of merit: not only teaching the value of effort, but also teaching how to recognize useful effort; the kind that builds, advances and truly deserves our energy.

Working hard will remain a virtue. Knowing when there is no reason to work quite so hard may well become one too.

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