

THE EFFORT PARADOX

Am I getting worse at thinking,
or just better at avoiding it?

————— SHAURAV SEN —————

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When AI makes thinking feel optional—and why that might be the entire problem

A couple of weeks ago, I wrote about noticing my brain slowing down—how AI seems to be changing the way I think. Many of you reached out sharing similar experiences. Some asked powerful questions about what this means for learning.

One question stayed with me: "Is AI the beginning of the end of learning, or the beginning of the end of learning as we know it?"

I answered that AI is accelerating the collapse of learning as an industry product. That learning is an individual sport, not a team sport.

But I've been wrestling with something deeper: What are we actually trading when we make thinking feel optional?

The Pattern I Keep Noticing

I reach for AI not when I can't solve a problem, but when solving it would require sustained mental effort. Reading something dense? I ask AI to explain it rather than pushing through the confusion myself. Facing a complex problem? I'm drafting a prompt before I've even tried to think it through. The tool is right there. Fast. Capable. Why wouldn't I use it?

But here's the uncomfortable question: Am I getting worse at thinking, or just better at avoiding it?

Here's what I've started noticing in meetings: Someone raises a complex problem. Twenty years ago, I would have thought it through—worked the angles, connected patterns, proposed approaches. That thinking was what made me valuable. Now I think: "I could ask AI to analyze this." And I do. And it's good. Often better than what I might have come up with after thirty minutes of working through it myself.

But something nags at me. Not about the answer. About myself. Have I actually thought about this problem? Or have I just efficiently obtained someone else's thinking? I'm not sure anymore where my capability ends and the tool begins.

Why This Actually Matters

Here's what I didn't fully appreciate until recently: the discomfort I'm avoiding isn't waste. It's the entire point.

There's research on something called "desirable difficulty." The finding is counterintuitive: making things harder—in specific ways—produces better learning. Struggling with material

before you understand it? That struggle is where your brain builds the connections that constitute understanding.

When I read something challenging and immediately ask AI to explain it, I get clarity fast. But I skip the cognitive work that would have built my ability to parse complex material myself. When I outsource problem-solving to AI, I get good solutions. But I miss the repeated attempts, the confusion, the gradual pattern recognition that would have developed my judgment.

The friction I'm avoiding isn't inefficiency. It's literally how capability develops. Physical muscles don't grow from watching other people lift weights. Cognitive muscles don't grow from consuming other people's thinking.

The Recognition That Changed Everything

Two weeks ago I wrote about my brain slowing down with AI use. But here's what I'm realizing: this pattern didn't start with AI. I've been avoiding cognitive friction for years. Maybe decades.

Think about how I approached learning throughout my career: When I encountered something I didn't understand, I looked for the summary. The framework. The five-step model. Something to give me the answer without requiring me to wrestle with the question. When I faced a challenge, I looked for "best practices." What worked for someone else? Can I just apply their solution? When I needed to develop a new skill, I looked for the course. The certification. The program that would "teach" me rather than creating conditions where I'd have to figure it out through doing.

I optimized for comfort. For speed. For the appearance of learning without the discomfort of actually learning. AI didn't create this instinct. AI just made it frictionless.

What I Didn't See Before

Here's what's uncomfortable to admit: most of the "learning" I've done throughout my career didn't actually build lasting capability.

I've sat through dozens of training programs. I got the certificates. I learned the models. I could explain the concepts in the moment. But six months later? A year later? Most of it was gone. Not because I forgot—because it never actually became capability in the first place.

I consumed information. I didn't develop skill. And I blamed myself. "I'm not good at retaining this stuff." "I need to be more disciplined about applying what I learn."

What I didn't see was that the entire approach was designed wrong. We don't develop capability by sitting through content, no matter how well-designed. We develop capability by doing hard things, struggling with them, failing, adjusting, and trying again.

The training programs I went through optimized for the opposite: make it easy, make it fast, minimize frustration, maximize completion rates. They eliminated the friction. Which meant they eliminated the learning.

Now I'm seeing this pattern everywhere: That leadership program I took? It gave me frameworks for "strategic thinking." But I didn't actually improve at thinking strategically until I had to make high-stakes decisions with incomplete information and live with the consequences. That communication skills workshop? It taught me techniques. But I didn't get better at difficult conversations until I had dozens of them that went poorly, and gradually learned to navigate conflict in real time.

Every time real capability developed, it came from struggle. Confusion. Repeated failure. Gradual improvement through doing the thing I was trying to get better at. Every time learning felt easy and fast? It didn't stick.

What AI Is Actually Revealing

AI didn't break learning. AI is revealing that our approach to learning was already broken—and showing us what might be possible if we use it differently.

For years, I've been looking for ways to avoid cognitive effort. "Just give me the answer." "What's the framework?" "How do I do this without having to figure it out myself?" Training programs catered to that instinct. They promised to make learning easy, fast, painless. To give me knowledge without requiring me to do the work of developing capability.

AI makes that bargain explicit: You can have answers without thinking. Explanations without confusion. Solutions without problem-solving. And now I'm seeing the cost—but also the possibility.

If I use AI to avoid cognitive effort—to get answers without thinking, to skip the struggle that builds capability—I'm just replicating what training programs have been doing for decades. Making learning feel easy while failing to build capability.

But here's what's interesting: AI could actually enable the kind of learning that works. Not by making things easier. By making personalized, curiosity-driven learning accessible.

Think about what becomes possible: Instead of sitting through generic training that treats everyone the same, I could pursue exactly what I'm curious about, when I'm ready to learn it, in the context where I need it. Instead of consuming pre-packaged content, I could

explore questions that matter to me, wrestle with problems I'm actually facing, and build capability through doing—with AI as a thinking partner, not a replacement for thinking.

The tool isn't the problem. How I choose to use it is.

The Question I Can't Shake

Every time I reach for AI, I'm making a choice: Am I using it to avoid the work of thinking, or to engage more deeply with what I'm trying to understand?

Am I asking it to give me answers so I don't have to struggle, or using it to explore complexity I'm genuinely curious about? Am I outsourcing cognitive effort, or using the tool to wrestle with problems in ways that build my capability?

Those might sound like subtle distinctions. But they produce completely different outcomes.

One path weakens capability. The other could actually develop it—in ways traditional training never did. The difference isn't the technology. It's the approach. It's whether I'm using AI to replicate the broken model of learning I've been following for years, or to finally engage with learning as an individual sport—driven by my curiosity, tailored to my context, built through struggle rather than consumption.

What This Means

I don't have this figured out yet. I'm not going to tell you AI is bad, or that you should reject useful tools, or that struggle is always better than efficiency.

But I am seeing something clearly: Learning isn't about acquiring information. It's about developing capability to think through problems yourself. To sit with confusion. To work through difficulty.

And almost everything about how I've approached learning throughout my career—the training programs, the frameworks, the shortcuts—has been designed to avoid exactly that.

AI isn't making me lazy. AI is revealing that I've been choosing the easy path for years and calling it learning. The question isn't whether to use AI. It's whether I'm using it to avoid the work of learning or to enable deeper engagement with what I'm actually trying to understand.

The real revolution isn't in having AI make learning easier. It's in finally using tools—including AI—in service of learning that actually works.

~Shaurav

When was the last time you chose to struggle through a problem instead of looking for the quick answer?

How much of what you "learned" in training programs actually changed how you work?

What would change if you used AI not to avoid thinking, but to think more deeply about what you're actually curious about?