WHY THE SPIRAL STILL MATTERS

Reclaiming the Slow Magic of Learning in the Age of AI

By Michael Selkis

A Framework for Human-Centered Learning in the Age of AI
By Michael Selkis | 82nd Street Academics

Not long ago, *New Yorker* writer Joshua Rothman described a moment that will likely sound familiar to anyone who's ever parented through chaos. His family was felled by norovirus the night before a long-planned vacation. Instead of panicking, Rothman turned to ChatGPT. The bot offered not just information, but logistics planning, email drafts, even a touch of humor. "You need backup, Josh," it told him.

And it worked.

But what Rothman really wrote about wasn't the power of AI—it was the existential quiet it leaves behind. Because once everything was handled, what remained was this question: *If I didn't have to try—should I have anyway?*

That question, I believe, may be one of the most important we can ask of ourselves right now. Not just as parents. Not just as workers. But as educators, leaders, and builders of future people.

The Efficiency Temptation

We live in an age that worships efficiency. AI tools are now capable of eliminating everything that once made learning messy: the late-night essay draft, the awkward email apology, the fumbling first attempt at saying something hard.

And that's precisely the problem.

Because learning is messy. So is growing. So is becoming someone who doesn't just know the right words—but feels their weight when they say them.

When we remove the struggle, we don't just remove friction. We erase the process by which people author themselves.

From Cooking to Copying: What's Actually Being Lost?

Rothman tells a story within the story. He reflects on learning to cook—how, over time, a person who cooks through failure, experimentation, and practice eventually becomes *a cook*. But someone who generates recipes through AI becomes *a user*.

The difference isn't semantic—it's existential.

In classrooms, the same holds true. A student who revises a story until it feels true is becoming a writer. A student who uses AI to generate polished prose is learning to prompt, not to persist. That distinction might not show up in the gradebook—but it echoes everywhere else: in confidence, in voice, in identity.

And it's especially urgent in the realm of social-emotional learning (SEL).

SEL Spirals and the Loss of the Loop

Social-emotional development doesn't run on scripts. It runs on spirals.

We loop through self-awareness. We revisit regulation, again and again. We navigate relationships in stages: rupture, repair, reflect, repeat. Each time, we come back with slightly more insight, slightly more grace. That's how empathy forms—not from a single "lesson," but from repeated, recursive encounters with real human moments.

But here's the problem: AI is exquisitely good at simulating those moments. It can offer tone-coached apology drafts, reflection prompts, even mediations. And in doing so, it tempts us to flatten the spiral. To let the bot handle the discomfort. To outsource the humanity.

And yet, discomfort is where transformation happens.

The Sacred Act of Trying

When we ask students to revise, we're not punishing them. We're honoring them. We're saying: you are still becoming. Your story isn't done. Your voice is worth the work.

Trying is not inefficiency—it's biography.

That's the deeper danger of letting AI stand in for human effort. Not that it will cheat the system, but that it will *cheat the self*. A child who never wrestles with how to say "I'm sorry" in their own voice may never fully believe that they *meant it*.

And a student who never fails doesn't just miss a lesson. They miss a chance to see themselves rise.

Reclaiming the Spiral

Let AI carry the weight of logistics. Let it analyze patterns. Let it generate form letters or synthesize meeting notes.

But let us carry the spiral.

Let us reserve the sacred labor of revision, reflection, and relational repair for human hands. Because those loops—imperfect, nonlinear, slow—are where meaning lives.

If we raise a generation that never has to return to the page, or the conflict, or the self, we may gain speed but lose substance.

The future will not belong to those who finish first. It will belong to those who return. Who loop back. Who spiral.

Again. And again. And again.

"Our humanity isn't measured by the pace of our strides— but by the depth of our return."

***Michael Selkis** is an educator and learning strategist focused on youth development, ethical innovation, and human-centered systems. He writes about the intersection of SEL, technology, and identity.*