We must urgently rethink the relationship between the workplace and the schoolroom; labor is hardly ever present in the education of young people. In a traditional society this may have been appropriate since labor was always present in the lives of children and young people. Those who lived in the countryside could count on having to work after school and sometimes in the morning before attending school. Even those who lived in the city were surrounded by various trades, professions and toys that mimicked the occupations of grownups. School, therefore, was a short and valuable period of escape from a (hard) labor dominated world.

Today the situation has been reversed. Labor is gradually vanishing from modern urban culture and even the games our children play, and has been replaced by finance, Internet-mediated relationships and, above all, consumption. A ride through the supermarket while sitting in a shopping cart is the first "economic" experience our children go through. Among the youth, friendship and labor during the crucial years of development have all but disappeared. Thus, when the time comes to start looking for work or finding an occupation, they are at first puzzled and often become unemployed.

Would it be too difficult to engage our students in labor a few hours a week during high school (at least in their senior years) or during the long months of summer vacation? The real obstacle, more serious than organizational or safety problems (the courtyards of our high schools have become extremely unsafe), can be traced to the deeply rooted idea that manual labor is not suitable for character development. A good education consists of studying literature, history and mathematics, not of working in a crafts workshop, an office, or a factory, let alone a farm. We have not yet freed ourselves, despite St. Benedict and Civil Humanism, from the vulgar idea that manual labor is impure and only suitable for servants and slaves. Young people carry this animosity towards labor into university, where working is considered unimportant and often pushed into the background. Many university students today do “odd jobs” for a living, but only a few engage in the profession they have chosen to pursue after graduation. During the past few decades, when the economy was thriving and prosperous (perhaps excessively), it may have made sense for people to study for twenty-four or twenty-five years and only start working after graduation. However, in view of the current stagnation of the economy (which is bound to continue for a while), a young person who spends four or more years preparing to practice a trade is very likely to discover that the conditions in society and the economy are not conducive to being able to get a job and actually practice that trade.

A sure sign of an economy or society in recession is that the present generation destroys rather than creates job opportunities for young people. In other words, young people who do not enter the labor market while attending university are at risk of never joining the workforce. If they are able, perhaps belatedly, they may find themselves in very unfavorable circumstances; while they dedicate themselves to their studies no one created good job opportunities for them. Thus, it is necessary to ensure that the years spent acquiring a university education are not simply preparation for a future (and uncertain) job. University students must seek for actual employment, not just “odd jobs”.

I realize this means going against the trend of recent decades that reduces and standardizes education programs. As a result, education has come to be regarded as a kind of fee people must pay in order to work under better conditions tomorrow. Instead, we should develop more flexible study programs that incorporate labor rather than replace it. Such programs may last many years because the goal is not just to earn a piece of paper, but to gain knowledge and learn. In a society as complex as ours, we learn much of our knowledge through labor.
Labor of any kind is mastered through experience, not in a classroom or by earning a master’s degree in a business school. This has important consequences for labor. My mother had to stop going to school when she was in fifth grade, but those five years of schooling grew within her; they became a jealously treasured asset that bore fruit and shaped her life and her children's. Today, however, research shows that after only a few years of labor much of the knowledge gained during one's studies is lost. People are far more ignorant after ten years of labor than immediately after graduating from university. This is because we have built a civilization of laborers that regard education as an instrument to be acquired at a certain stage of life (youth). This instrument is then used only to find a job; the labor market (for adults) is separate from school and education.

This is especially true in large companies, which hire capable graduates and submit them to an unbearably demanding work environment. Such companies do not provide the time nor space necessary to cultivate our humanity outside the company, much less inside. Therefore, we are producing one-dimensional people whose sole motivation to study is to stay relevant or enhance their performance, which misses the most important characteristic of education: graciousness. We need to re-humanize the postmodern workplace by filling it with culture, art, beauty and graciousness. It must be an environment where people can flourish in every way while working. They need to have time to study beautiful and difficult things, even at forty or fifty years of age, so that they do not reach retirement exhausted and ignorant. It is necessary to bring more of the workplace into the classroom and vice versa.

Translated by Tomás Olcese