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# The Dschola Project

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**Key words:** *Schools for schools, school network, ICT-based animation, service and experimentation activities*

## **Abstract:**

*Dschola is a three year (2000-2003) public-private project set up in Piedmont - Italy, developed through a collaborative work structure among different players, sharing the aim of improving educational, training and experimental services through ICT.*

*Dschola aims at stimulating greater attention to ICT, by involving students, teachers and families in partnership with schools, involving 2.828 educational structures and 50.000 teachers. Merging a top-down with a bottom-up approach, the 27 excellence primary and secondary schools involved in the project, reference points for technological and didactical issues in their regional area, aim at building opportunities for skill acquisition, applying technological innovation towards didactics or organizational management.*

## **1 The Dschola Project framework**

“Dschola” is a community of schools consisting of a selected group of primary and secondary schools, the so-called Centres of Service, Animation and Experimentation (CSAS), with proven technical and didactical excellence at regional level aiming at disseminating their experiences and expertise towards all the schools in the region. The network, involving 2.828 educational structures and about 50.000 teachers, is developed through a collaborative work structure among different players, all working at distance in a shared, cooperative and interactive use of ICT and multimedia, sharing the aim of improving educational, training and experimental services through ICT. An investment of 21 millions of Euro by the Bank foundation Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Torino has given the project a boost for its start-up economic support, in order to enhance ongoing networking activities.

Since its beginning, CSAS have joined the project following an innovative operational model. Merging a top-down (overcoming digital divide in the educational field as a whole promoting a conscious use of ICT) with a bottom-up approach (promoting a framework to enhance bottom-up initiatives and expertise), CSAS aim at building and expanding opportunities for skill acquisition, applying technological innovation towards didactics or organizational management.

The project policy concern is moreover directed towards proposing a model for the implementation of the ICT use in the educational field, founded on:

- highlighting best practice experiences,
- sustaining the creation of a virtual community of schools in a cooperative framework - as suggested by the slogan of the project: “Schools for schools”,
- customizing the use of ICT knowledge and technical innovation,

- providing a training model in which teachers' skills are used and improved.

As far as concerns the community's physical side, in its first running period, the project has focused on every single CSAS service, animation and experimentation activity, with particular attention on teacher training and on the optimisation of the network technical infrastructure. Schools are, in a way, a particular environment where teachers are used to work independently from each other or in small groups: and that's why, in its former part, the project has promoted face-to-face meetings and training activities (i.e. project management courses).

When schools have started feeling more comfortable with their project activities, they have started working in co-operation on more incisive and major topics. Moreover, as from autumn 2002 the project has been following an action line based upon the creation of thematic regional labs, organised in networks of schools, on various topics, such as e-learning

Furthermore, as from the beginning of 2003, the Piedmont Regional Government, acknowledging the importance of the CSAS in the regional territory, has financed a group of ICT-based projects developed by the schools involved in the Dschola community. Those projects are managing the implementation of administrative systems and tools for schools. They are more precisely focusing on defining and implementing administration procedures and tools that support structured and effective service provisioning, to improve quality and cost effectiveness.

As far as concerns its digital side, the community meets its members in a virtual meeting point, the official web site of the project: [www.dschola.it](http://www.dschola.it). The web represents the evidence of all the activities running in the network, as service (training), animation (seminars, conferences), experimentation activities, with particular attention to official records and work in-progress reports broadcasting, in order to disseminate every single data related to the project.

The web site is organized in thematic sections, providing information on the community ongoing activities and an ICT and school topics press release, and supplying a constant overview on EU programmes, activities and projects related to ICT use in the education environment. The web site is based upon an open source platform (PHP Nuke) allowing direct contribution by the readers and the community members. In the Italian version of the web site, which is available also in English, Spanish and soon in French, all the members of the community can manage and directly enrich Dschola publishing news, comments, events, file sharing. The network is moreover animated through community services, as forums, mail hosting, project information mailing lists and weekly newsletters on the topics dealt with the web site. In particular, in order to reinforce the community spirit, every project-related official information or data transmission is shared through the web site or disseminated via mailing lists.

Besides these activities, the project official web site has been recently implemented in his graphics and structure. The goal for the year 2003 is to more actively involve students and families in the community, providing proper and selected material suitable for those categories. Due to this fact, as from the beginning of 2003, the web site has been redesigned, in order to provide a personalised access to the different web sections, in accordance with on the one side the user's profile, on the other hand the intention of more incisively focus on students' and parents' necessities.

The project is focusing how co-operative work can be a winning choice for didactical and administrative pilot programmes running in the educational environment. Teachers are experimenting collaboration as an innovative and successful framework. Furthermore, CSAS are more and more asserting themselves as didactical and technological reference points for all the schools in the regional territory, providing training in small municipalities and being acknowledged as institutional service structures for Public Bodies and Local Government.

To conclude, the Dschola experience has demonstrated how a regional project can become a best practice a national and international level, constituting a referring model and a core element being adapted and re-used in different social, economical and educational contexts.

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