

eLearning and digital revolution in the Italian school: where are we?

What has been done so far for the use of e-learning in schools and what could be done to make the most of the potential of online education?

In the beginning there was only the blackboard with chalk, then the computers arrived, then it was the turn of the LIM (Multimedia Interactive Board) and finally, the Ministry of Education, University and Research, thought of a plan to bring the digital revolution to the Italian school. Thus, the National Digital School Plan, PNSD, an ambitious project to be funded with over 220 million euros between 2015 and 2020. The history of eLearning as a methodological and cultural revolution in the Italian school began like this, like a fairy tale. But where are we today? What has been done so far and how much is there still to do to really create a digital school?

The promises of the PNSD for digitization in public schools

The PNSD is a strategic tool that has allocated over 220 million euros to bring the new digital technologies and methodologies to Italian classrooms and administrations by 2020. The key elements of this strategy are:

- Network access
- Creation of innovative digital environments
- Creation of a digital identity for each student and each teacher
- Promotion of computer literacy
- Creation and sharing of digital content
- Training of teachers and staff

A survey conducted by the AGI in 2018 analyzed the data provided by the Ministry of Education on the progress of the work. The first point, namely the creation of infrastructures to allow access to the network is indicative of how slowly the plan is proceeding. According to the data, in fact, only 10% of school facilities have access to broadband.

The funds allocated for the creation of innovative digital environments in 2019

The second stage of the digitalization process is the creation of innovative digital environments for which the use of 140 million euros was expected by 2020. Also, in this case, the works proceed rather slowly, starting from the disbursement of the funds. For now, in fact, 22 million euros have been allocated to 1115 school facilities that have requested the funds in 2018.

How much remains to be done to bring e-learning into Italian schools?

The digitalization process of the school should be completed by 2020, but it is still hard to achieve some key points of the strategy. The critical points are:

- Lack of broadband internet
- Lack of digital learning environments and tools
- Lack of teacher training

Assuming that there is internet in the classroom and a tool to access the network, for many teachers the problem remains of using eLearning platforms, even if particularly intuitive. The PNSD had promised to finance the figure of the digital animator, a volunteer teacher who had to deal with digital programs, with 1,000 euros a year. The 1,000 euros have not yet been paid out and this facilitator has often not been trained.

At the Mi level, there is still no structured program for digital teacher training. Instead, we prefer to leave the initiative to individual schools or to protocols with some companies. This could create even more disparities between central and peripheral schools, especially in small towns.

Creative solutions to school digitization

If only 10% of Italian schools have taken the first step towards digital transformation, guaranteeing access to the network, it means that the road to digitization is still long. If there is no internet connection, digital learning environments and tools cannot be used.

In many schools, especially in Southern Italy, we tried to respond with the philosophy of BYOD, bring your own device. In the absence of tools and digital spaces, students can bring their smartphone or tablet to access the network and interactive educational content.

There have been strong criticisms of this practice, because for some it represents a step backwards for the MIUR compared to the million-dollar promises contained in the PNSD. For others, bringing your device to school is a way to conduct the digital transformation process from the bottom up, starting with the students.

Are they the key?