

The Piazza's Mother Tongue

Berardo Paradiso (October 23, 2008)



IACE (Italian American Committee on Education) is promoting a physical exchange between American and Italian students with the aim to give American youths the possibility to visit Italian piazza and improve their knowlege of Italian.

For young Americans studying Italian and who are interested in all aspects of Italian culture, the Internet is a wonderful means of getting in touch with their Italian peers: it is a kind of virtual piazza where they can chat and share common ideas and interests, and freely express their opinions about all kinds of issues.

We at IACE are very happy to be part of "[Progetto Scuole](#) [2]"(*) in partnership with i-Italy and Italian and American universities. Since we started our project, thousands of kids have joined our piazza, some aspects of which can be considered virtual. In reality, since it is frequented by real people, day



after day our piazza is becoming more vibrant and alive, with the common objective to speak the language of Dante and exchange ideas about a common love of Italy. This is what people have always done and continue to do, in real, physical piazze.

Piazza del Duomo in Milan, Piazza della Signoria in Florence, Piazza San Marco in Venice, Piazza del Popolo and Piazza Navona in Rome, and every single piazza in each Italian city, small town, or village has preserved the same spirit. Like the agorà in Athens or the ancient forum in Rome, the piazza has always been at the heart of a city where its spiritual, political, and socio-economic events take place. The piazza in Italy is still a common space where citizens gather daily and where they can meet in casual or formal ways. In the same piazza usually filled with children, it is not unusual to hear their high-pitched voices expressing their freedom while chasing cats or pigeons under the smiling surveillance of parents or nonni. In ancient times the piazza was already an established place of communication where at first verbal announcements would be made, and later written pamphlets and tracts would be distributed, read, and commented publicly.

In my village in southern Italy, the announcement of a movie or a special sale was cried out by a person called a banditore. Every village had one, and the announcement was always preceded by the sound of a trumpet! I will never forget the banditore of my village: his first name was Vincenzo but his nickname was *il francese*. No one could ever understand what he was saying so they called him "the Frenchman" for his incomprehensible language. We were happy to see him; we knew that something new was about to be announced. We would follow him until after a while we could capture the essence of his message.

How I miss my piazza! A few years ago I returned to my village and I saw an old, blind woman sitting on her balcony, enjoying the fresh air. I called to her: "Zia Giulia, com'è stai?" [Aunt Giulia, how are you?] She recognized my voice and answered with one word: "Nostalgia." The word bounced on every wall and resounded in my ears, touching my heart. She was right. I was nostalgic; I missed the stones, the air, the sounds, the light, the odors, and the people. I missed my past and my friends.

This is the reason why we at IACE are promoting a physical exchange between American and Italian students. Our objective is to give American youths who are interested in *italianità* the possibility to connect using modern technology, but we also want to help them complete their virtual experience by visiting the physical piazza and exploring different points of view, lifestyles, customs, and foods. A group of young American students of Italian had the opportunity this summer to spend two weeks in Florence and Lignano near Venice, where they lived and interacted with a large group of their Italian peers. They were compelled to adjust to new situations and new ways of life which they would never have experienced solely through their Internet connection.

This very enriching physical encounter with the Italian city, its piazze, and Italian youngsters' ways of living and thinking taught them respect and acceptance for one another and their unique cultures. The experience of living in a country among its people, as well as being connected to its physical piazza will lay the foundation for future generations to have a real understanding and a fruitful exchange with Italy, Italians, and *italianità*.

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(*) ProgettoScuole.org [2] is a non profit partnership between the Italian Consulate General in New York, the Italian American Committee on Education (IACE), the Italian-language daily *America Oggi* [3], the web services company Digitalians Corporation, and i-Italy. It offers American students of Italian the tools to publish their own interactive web journal

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