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**Community of interests in a European context**

Working on a common educational project in Europe is quite a challenge. This is especially true for the domain of visual learning in which national and regional cultural traditions and issues of identity have become more and more part of the political agenda. With the disappearance of formal borders between most European countries, the transfer of European citizens to other European countries has become much more easy and the interchange of cultural traditions more prominent. Next to this, Europe sees large groups of refugees and immigrants moving into Europe from outside, looking for safety, freedom and economic prosperity. At the same time, they bring with them their own religions, worldviews and traditions. As a response to this transfer and influx we see a tendency at national level to place one's own country, identity and traditions first.

These days, Europe (like the rest of the world) is also facing a predominant role of visual information shared at global level, thanks to social media like YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, but also due to the enormous speed by which images are sent around all over the world, irrespective of national borders and traditions.

So the development of a Common European Framework in days of growing nationalism and strengthening borders on the one hand and (commercial) visual globalisation on the other, is quite a challenge. The project started by ENViL was meant to arrive at common grounds within the European context. The issue of cultural diversity demands for a critical reappraisal of the need for mutual understanding and respect. Europe has a long and bloody history in fighting for individual freedom and human rights and for opportunities to determine one's own future. However, the end of totalitarian systems in Europe does not mean that these traditional European values are secured and available to all. It seems that the need for a search of what is common in Europe is more urgent than we expected in 1989, when the iron curtain came down and the many of the historic causes of political division after the Second World War were finally removed. The need for a common framework is urgent, as the school subjects that concentrate on learning in the visual domain tend to become marginalized (again) in favour of school subjects that seem to better serve the economic agenda at national level. It is also regrettable that the profession of art education is characterised by little agreement on what learning in the domain of visual learning should and could involve. Or at least, so it seems.

So, the time is ripe to look for what binds us together, to look for commonalities of the role of visual culture, including the arts, play in European societies. It is against this background that ENViL, the European Network for Visual Literacy, embarked on its project to develop a Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy (CEFR-VL). The project was financially supported as a Comenius project by a grant of the European Union for a two years' period. The project started in 2014 and was formally completed by April 1, 2016. The results were published in September 2016 (Wagner & Schönau 2016). The final publication has a central part (A), in English, French and German, that introduces the Framework and the structural model, supported by four articles on the concepts of competency and visual literacy, the role of situations in learning in this domain and on the contribution of visual literacy to general education. It is this part A, that is reviewed by invited international experts in this Special Issue (Wagner & Schönau 2016: 64 - 108).

**The European context**

As this project to develop a Common European Framework of Reference is a European project in the first place, it was decided to work on a connection with the more generic discussions and developments in educational thinking in Europe. In the past decades, two major transnational educational projects were executed in Europe that suggest the potentials to look for commonalities.

The first one is the development of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL), developed by the Council of Europe. Living in a continent where people speak so many different languages it became urgent to find common grounds to determine and validate ability levels in foreign language acquisition. The comparability of linguistic competence is highly needed to make it easier for employees to find work in another European country. The project started in 1989 and the results were formally implemented in 2001. ENViL did not have the research period, nor the means to do something comparable for the visual domain. Nevertheless, the model of the CEFRL and the introduction of skill levels were taken as points of reference for the ENViL project.

The other European project relates to vocational education: how can we determine if a person is able to do her or his job and how can we compare professional standards? Here, the concept of 'competency' (or 'competence') plays a central role. A 'competency' is generally defined as the combined use of knowledge, skills and attitudes to act competently in a specific situation that is relevant for a professional domain. Competencies are described in terms of outcome or demonstrable behaviour, not input. In the CEFR-VL publication, Ernst Wagner and Katrin Zapp (2016) introduce the context of competency-oriented approaches in European education. As the notion of 'competencies' has been around in the European educational discourse for quite some time, it was decided by ENViL to develop a comprehensive and inclusive model of competencies and sub-competencies on the basis of a Europe-wide survey on relevant curricula. In the actual survey, 37 reviews of (national) curricula and competency models were collected from 22 different European countries, including Turkey. The results were analysed and discussed by the ENViL working group. In the meantime, new empirical research has been carried out and previous findings analysed. After a series of working sessions by ENViL researchers, a first model was drafted and presented as a prototype in the final publication of the research project. The ambition of this framework of reference is that it should be consulted as a foundation for connecting national and regional curricula. Its aim is to advise, not to standardise. Due to its character, it does not prescribe or even describe optimal content, technical and artistic skills, knowledge about visual phenomena and art or views on the role of visual communication and expression to utilise in the development of competencies. The Framework concentrates on the underlying and constituent competencies only.

## **Visual literacy**

In the domain of visual learning in Europe, we find a great variety in the way the domain for visual learning is subdivided at national level. School subjects can concentrate on art, design, photography, art history, audio-visual education, handicraft, cultural education, or on artistic education in general, to name only a few content foci of the domain. To overcome this great variety in concepts and content and to indicate the broadness of the domain of visual learning, the concept of 'visual literacy' was introduced. In the ENViL publication, 'visual literacy' is primarily used as a generic term that covers all school subjects that concentrate on learning in the visual domain. In this volume, the concept of 'visual literacy' is also used to describe what the subjects in essence are about: becoming a fully 'visually literate' European citizen. In his contribution to the publication, Folkert Haanstra (2016) discusses the different notions of visual literacy and presents a definition that we accepted for use in the framework. This use of two different definitions for the same concept (visual literacy), however, generated a discussion that also returns in some of the reviews in this special issue. Why use the word 'literacy', and not, for instance, 'visualcy' (Mitchell 2008)? This basic theoretical issue with profound practical relevance will be discussed in the final contribution to this special issue.

## **Competency**

To make the framework more robust, we decided to make connections with current developments in educational theory and policy. As mentioned above, the notion of a 'framework of reference' was introduced to make a connection with other frameworks, most specifically the one for learning languages (CEFR). Also, the concept of 'competency' was introduced to reveal stronger connections with current educational projects. The concept of 'competency' is actually not at all new for the domain, as it is already included in many recent curricula, explicitly or implicitly. Learning in the visual domain has always been based on the application of knowledge, skills and attitudes to address a given situation or task, so the concept of 'competency' seems most fit for the domain of visual learning. Finally, research performed in connection with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills also offers important insights for the development of a framework for the domain of visual learning (P21; Binkley e.a, 2012).

## **Situations**

Being competent only makes sense when there is a problem at hand that demands for action. What to do and how to act is always dependent on a situation, or, more specifically, on the interpretation of a situation. A situation is an environment that is considered from a specific angle or with a specific purpose. By interpreting a situation, one can arrive at an action that makes sense, not only in a factual way, but also with regard to the meaning of that situation for the person(s) involved. This connection to personal, social or practical relevance can help to arrive at assignments and learning situations that make sense for the learner and supports the development of the culturally educated citizen of the future.

A situation can be defined by six key factors: place, people, time, image/objects, actions and interests. In the CEFR-VL, some of these key factors are more specific like context (e.g. religion, issues of copyright and privacy, economy), visual rhetoric (e.g. decorative, variety, entertaining), materials and techniques (the way things are made), and genre (e.g. documentary, portrait, advertisement). A situation can refer to the personal domain, the public domain, the occupational domain and the educational domain. This latter has a special status, as educational situations are created in a 'protected' environment, and developed to support the successful learning of competencies. On a practical level this means, that any assignment should relate to a situation that is both relevant for personal development, social and cultural interaction (citizenship) and as preparation for the occupational domain.

## **The prototype**

The framework as published by ENViL is presented as a prototype. It is a first step to arrive at a model that in the end will be robust, practical and hopefully widely accepted. In order to make the prototype acceptable, the researchers of ENViL decided to start its development with the investigation of what is common in curricula in Europe. It is hoped for that in this way the prototype can connect to what is already common practice in most countries. To focus on the common factors will inevitably result in omitting what is not common and what makes a curriculum unique for a grade level or a country. But by looking first for what is common in European curricula, we could arrive at a common ground more quickly. From this common basis, it was easier to develop a model that is inclusive, which means it can cover the different national approaches, as well as different age levels and school types. The second step to have the CEFR-VL accepted is to publish results of related research that contribute to the further development of the original prototype, and to organize meetings, discussions and reviews from professional communities with a variety of theoretical foci and practical standpoints to generate reactions that may inspire further research.

## **The model**

The prototype of the structural model, representing the generic content of Visual Literacy, is composed of the following elements.

First of all, the domain of visual learning is related to general goals in education regarding civic engagement, social cohesion, personal unfolding and employability. Second, visual competency is

always related to specific situations. The notion of situations makes learning specific and goal-oriented. This general position of visual literacy as a domain of learning is presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Visual Literacy in its context

The curriculum analysis showed that in almost all curricula and educational programs, a fundamental division is made between the 'production' of images and objects on one hand and 'responding to' existing images and objects on the other hand. The interconnectedness of production and response is an issue for further discussion, but the distinction as such is basic. Together they cover what can be described as the core of learning in the visual domain. But learning also demands reflection on what and how one is acquiring new knowledge. Therefore, a third basic aspect is introduced: reflection on one's own productive and responsive handling of images, an activity that belongs to 'metacognition'.

Finally, it should be made clear that visual competency is not developing in isolation. It can be interpreted as the subject specific variety of more generic types of competencies that are manifest in all areas of learning. First, there are 'self-competencies' that support the development of one's personality and one's personal strength. Next, we have 'methodological competencies', ways to make systematic use of methods that are needed in most situations. The third group includes 'social competencies', like communication and social interaction. These groups of generic competencies constitute the general background of what is taking place within the domain of visual learning. The interconnectedness of these aspects is visualized in Figure 2.

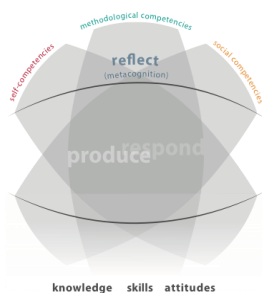


Figure 2: The structural model showing the basic elements and relationships

The three main categories of generic competencies overlap, thus creating a central playing field where they also interact.

When looking for all subject specific (sub-)competencies involved in European curricula a great variety in the naming and description of the abilities, skills and competencies can be observed. Nevertheless,

they often convey similar intentions. What is meant by a specific concept or sub-competency in one language is not always covered fully by the 'same' concept in another language. This difference in the content of concepts will remain a challenge for any discussion regarding what may be considered 'common'. The complexity of this exercise is underlined by the need of a glossary in three languages in our publication.

The research group invested much time and discussion to arrive at a selection of the most relevant sub-competencies. The model as published is based on what participating researchers thought most important. Eventually, sixteen sub-competencies were included in the model: analyse, communicate, create, describe, draft, empathise, envision, experience aesthetically, experiment, interpret, judge, perceive, present, realise, use and value. It was only possible to present these sub-competencies in the form of a cloud of concepts with no separating lines. How the sub-competencies actually (can) relate to one another is subject for further investigation.

The overview of sub-competencies is presented in Figure 3.

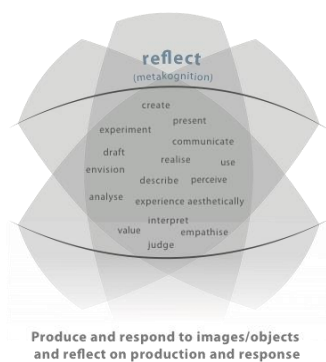


Figure 3: The competency structural model with sub-competencies.

As one can see, the division between producing and responding is not visible anymore. Some sub-competencies are more typical for production (like 'experiment' and 'create'), others seem to belong to responding ('experience aesthetically', 'judging'), while still others can relate to both ('interpret', 'analyse').

Apparently, these visualisations have a preliminary character. These figures are supposed to give an indication of what the researchers have found and what they want to explain.

### Competency levels

'Being competent' is the ultimate goal. But describing the preferred highest level indicates the possibility of lower levels. It was decided to introduce three levels in the context of general education: a basic level (elementary), describing what should be a minimum to be acquired, an intermediate and the highest level ('competent') describing what a fully educated citizen (in Europe) should be able to do or understand. This highest level is an optimal school achievement, not the ultimate performance in visual literacy. There is a still higher level that only professionals in the domain of visual literacy achieve. Describing it, however, falls outside of the scope of the research project of ENViL as the framework relates to what all European citizens will be able to do and understand not to what professionals in this domain should be able to do.

As 'analyse', 'describe', and 'interpret' have specific roles in the domains of producing and responding, two parallel level descriptions were developed for these sub-competencies in each domain. While

developing level descriptions, the group decided to assign only one level for the sub-competencies 'empathise', 'perceive' and 'value'.

### **Visual literacy and general education**

The central part of the ENViL publication (part A) is concluded with an essay on the role of visual literacy in general education (Buschkühle, 2016). It puts Visual Literacy in a European philosophical context, in which a broad cultural education is promoted that addresses knowledge and skills in various areas of life, culture and science. This type of education seems to be ideal for the individual who is responsible for him/herself and society and thus promotes individuality as well as democratic citizenship.

### **Other parts of the publication**

The publication includes many more contributions that elaborate on different aspects of the Framework, like its 'European' character and its relation to European cultural policy; the concepts of reference frame and metacognition; examples from frameworks developed in Australia, England and the United States; the way research for this prototype was executed and how researchers arrived at their prototypical model. It also contains seventeen contributions on how to put the framework work into educational practice. These relate to issues of implementation: the use of situations and the construction or adaptation of assignments, including some practical examples from primary and secondary education; different innovative ways of assessment; and the consequences for teacher training and for out-of-school learning. All these contributions are in German with an English summary. In the last section, two critical reviews (in English) on the CEFR-VL by two invited external reviewers (Bernard Darras and Kevin Tavin) are presented. Finally, a trilingual glossary of 44 of the most important concepts used in the CEFR-VL is added.

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