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**Abstract**

When the researchers of the European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL) decided to develop a Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy, it was hope for that the concept of 'visual literacy' would be a neutral description of what learning in this domain is all about. However, 'visual literacy' is a much more faceted concept that reflects different approaches to the domain of visual perception and visual communication. In March 2018 ENViL therefore decided to rename the Framework into the Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Competency (CEFR-VC), thus giving prominence to its central concept ('competency') and leaving space for various meanings of 'visual literacy'. On 12 March 2018, the Board of ENViL decided to rename the 'Common European Framework for Visual Literacy' into: 'Common European Framework of Visual Competency (acronym: CEFR-VC). The decision to rename the Framework was taken after discussions within ENViL on the conceptual confusion of the concept of 'visual literacy'. The choice for 'visual competency' also better indicates the approach taken in the Framework to describe the essence of learning in the visual domain in terms of competencies.

**Keywords**

literacy

visual learning

visual literacy

visual competency

Europe

**Various definitions of 'Visual Literacy'**

When the European network of researchers decided to give itself a name, the choice for 'Visual Literacy' was made to indicate that this network covers all learning in the visual domain. In Europe (and elsewhere) many different names are given to the school subjects that relate to this domain: art education, Kunsterziehung, beeldende vorming, éducation plastique, visual communication, handicraft, design, photography, textile art, media education, cultural studies, audio-visual art, art history, etc. This variety relates to differences in educational goals, scope of the subject, the materials and techniques that are given central importance, artistic, educational and social approaches, and national educational traditions and policies. To avoid a preference in the name of the new community for any of these traditions and approaches, the concept of 'visual literacy' was chosen as an alternative that seemed to integrate all the areas of visual study and creation (Wagner and Schönau 2016: 64). Thence, the network was named the 'European Network for Visual Literacy', with ENViL as acronym.

So from 2013, at the very start of the ENViL project on the development of a Common European Framework, the concept of 'visual literacy' was adopted to identify the domain of this Framework. But 'visual literacy' turned out to be more than an umbrella concept to describe the domain of school subjects, as it was already in use for a much longer time for a field that was partially different from the one ENViL intended to map. John Debes, who founded the International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA) in 1969, offered a definition focusing mostly on visual perception:

Visual Literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. [...] they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication. (1969: 25)

He later compared the concept to an amoeba, a body that is difficult to define and may include parts still completely unknown. Criticism of the definition realized its overemphasis of the sensory, while neglecting the symbolic aspects. The communicative aspect of the domain soon became the centre of research, and Hortin's definition of visual literacy as 'the ability to understand "read" and use ("write") images and to think and learn in terms of images, that is, to think visually' (1983: 99). This conceptualization already foreshadowed the major problem with the term: 'literacy' in its name. Moreover, critics of this interpretation lacked reference to aesthetics and creativity – two aspects that are central in the school subjects ENViL is concentrating on. In the eighties, many scholars suggested abandoning the term as phonologically, syntactically and semantically untenable. In an attempt to line up all research areas that intend to claim priority in the study of visual literacy, researchers compare the discourse about the domain to the well-known story of six blind men trying to describe an elephant through touching different parts of its body. Even a Delphi study on the use of the concept in scientific literature failed to result in one concise definition and suggested theme-related interpretations instead. However, every field of study seems to interpret the concept through the lenses of its own scientific agenda. (For an overview of the evolution of visual literacy definitions in the last decades of the twentieth century, see Avgerinou and Ericson [2002].)

Interpretations of 'visual literacy' closely related to research areas of ENViL generated the need to define it in the context of this framework, too. In the publication of the Framework the researchers opted for the definition of 'visual literacy' given by Brill et al.:

A group of acquired sub-competencies for interpreting and composing visible messages.

A visually literate person is able to:

- (a) discriminate, and make sense of visible objects,
- (b) create static and dynamic visible objects effectively in a defined space,
- (c) comprehend and appreciate the visual testaments of others, and
- (d) conjure objects in the mind's eye. (Brill et al. 2001: 9; Haanstra 2016: 103)

This definition describes the domain of visual literacy (or literacies) in terms of (sub-) competencies. As such, 'visual literacy' and 'visual competency' are interchangeable. However, within ENViL, the reference to the linguistic domain in the term 'visual literacy' was already seen as a second-best choice. A perfect solution would be one that unequivocally refers to the unique character of the visual domain. Thus ENViL ended up with two different definitions of 'visual literacy', as is also observed by Robert Sabol in his contribution to this journal: one that describes the domain, and the other one to describe the related sub-competencies.

In his invited review of the Framework, Bernard Darras criticized the choice of a term including the word 'literacy' as it is related to the dominant way of thinking in terms of written and spoken language. Being a semiotician himself, Darras is critical about the linguistic approach in semiotics with regard to images and the visual domain. 'Scientifically, this close connection with the linguistic and literacy world has already wreaked havoc, by suggesting that images function like texts and should be studied as such' (Darras 2016: 382). Where 'literacy' can be understood as a generic term to indicate a kind of common knowledge about a domain of learning (computer literacy, financial literacy, historical literacy, etc.) it can also refer to a semiotic approach in philosophy, as a specific approach on the way we arrive at knowledge about the world. The contribution of Marie Fulkova in this issue underlines this diversity in meaning. The Framework as developed by ENViL intend to be neutral with regard to how this domain of learning is addressed in practice. A semiotic approach to imagery is only one of the possibilities, but the Framework as such should not suggest this is the only one.

Another objection to the concept of 'literacy' in an educational context is formulated by Luis Errazuriz in this issue. In a South American context – but probably not only there – the notion of 'literacy' also implies its opposite, 'illiteracy' that is a derogatory term suggesting a low level of economic and social development. Seen from this point of view, being 'literate' gets an elitist flavour as it relates to those are fortunate to be educated and considered 'literate'. As it is the ambition of ENViL to have the Framework serve as a set of goals and objectives for the education of all, the suggestion that anyone who has not arrived at the 'competent' level should be termed partly 'illiterate' is unacceptable. But the comment of Errazuriz should make us aware that the notion of 'literacy' has a sociological meaning as well – one that needs consideration.

So the reviews in this special issue support the observation that the concept of 'visual literacy' can have different meanings that might obfuscate the neutral character of the Framework. It is for these reasons that ENViL decided to change the name of the Framework into 'Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Competency'. The choice for 'visual competency' is based on the fact that the Framework is based on the notion of 'competency' in the first place. 'Visual competency' is the generic term than includes all sub-competencies that can contribute to learning in the visual domain. So now the name of the Framework is hopefully more specific and education related than it was before. At the same time, it gives more space to a discussion on what 'literacy', being this visual, linguistic, financially or historical, can be all about, including specific philosophical notions related to this term.

## **The domain of visual learning**

This change from 'literacy' to 'competency' does not solve all the problems related to defining learning in the visual domain. Already the term 'visual' has been discussed, also by Darras, Tavin and Paatela-Nieminen in their reviews of the Framework before its publication (Darras 2016; Tavin 2016). What is made or presented in this domain is not limited to visual information. It also addresses other senses (like architecture and modern media do), as well as linguistic information processing (in film, video and multimedia). All these aspects considered, we still lack a word that embraces all these varieties without losing what is central: the visual. So, for the time being, 'visual' will be used.

### **Visual competency and art**

And what about 'art'? The notion of 'visual art' is included in the domain of visual learning. It might even be seen as the paradigmatic format of how visual imagery can best transfer meaning through visual representation and perception, as 'artists' are best trained in giving form to meaning by means of visual imagery, being these images, objects or visual processes. But next to 'artists' there are other professionals who know how to produce images and related products that communicate meaning just by the power of visual representation and perception, being these advertisement, press photos, YouTube films, websites and the like. Therefore, the 'art' focus should not be emphasized when describing the domain of visual competency.

### **The future**

Although the Framework was renamed in March 2018, the editors have decided to keep the previous name of the Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy in this Special Issue. The main reason is that the publication that is commented here bears this name. However, the concept of 'visual literacy' in the name of the framework generated specific responses by the reviewers. It turned out to be impossible to replace 'visual literacy' by 'visual competency' in this collection of papers precisely because our invited reviewers discussed the concept of 'visual literacy' from so many different angles, thus contributing to the international discourse on how to map this domain.

In future publication ENViL, however, will use the new name of the framework: CEFR-VC as our model is a competency-based contribution to research on teaching, learning and assessment in art education. At the same time, 'visual literacy' is still a relevant and important concept for our research group. To represent our concern for the domain, ENViL will remain the European Network for Visual Literacy.

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## Contributor details

Andrea Kárpáti is professor of Education and UNESCO Chairholder at Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty Sciences, Centre for Science Communication and Multimedia in Education. She is Head of the Visual Culture Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Science and ELTE University. Research foci: visual culture of children and adolescents, digital literacy, museum learning and STEAM: synergy of science and arts education. She has served ten years on the World Council of InSEA with two terms as Vice President.

Diederik Schönau has worked as a visual art subject specialist, trainer and at the Dutch institute for educational measurement Cito. At Cito International he was international consultant for ministries, schools and examination institutes on test and examination construction. He was professor in arts education at ArtEZ University of the Arts in Zwolle. He served at the Executive Board of InSEA, of which three years as President. He is currently Chair of the European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL).

Contact:

Andrea Kárpáti, Faculty of Science, Visual Culture Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Science and ELTE University, ELTE University, H-1117 Budapest, Pázmány Péter s. 1/A, Hungary.

E-mail: [andrea.karpati@ttk.elte.hu](mailto:andrea.karpati@ttk.elte.hu)

<https://orcid.org/>

Diederik Schönau, De Haaghe 8, 6641JC Beuningen, the Netherlands.

E-mail: [dwschonau@gmail.com](mailto:dwschonau@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/>