Renaming the Framework into 'Common European Framework of Visual Competency'

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Introduction

On March 12, 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 is based after discussions within ENViL to choose 'visual competency' to indicate this approach of the domain of Visual Literacy that is actually formulated in terms of competencies.

The notion of Visual Literacy

The initial choice for the concept of 'Visual Literacy' to cover the content of the framework was based on the name of the network itself: European Network for Visual Literacy. The name of the network was chosen in 2012. Due to the diversity in national and subject-specific traditions a great variety of school subjects relate to this domain of visual learning. To name a few (using the English translations): art, design, artistic education, handicraft, drawing, audiovisual art, art history, plastic arts, photography, ceramics, 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. Because of this great diversity in names, goals and contents, it was considered necessary to look for a name that would cover all these subjects, without giving preference to one interpretation, tradition or approach. This name should be neutral, relevant for contemporary discussions in this domain and broad enough to cover all related domains. Thus the neutral term 'visual literacy' was adopted.

'Visual Literacy' was also chosen as the notion of 'literacy' is commonly used to indicate a specific degree of competency in a certain domain of learning, like quantitative literacy (or numeracy), technological literacy, media literacy, computer literacy and even health literacy (Haanstra, 2016, p. 102). Many different descriptions have been brought forward in the last decades to define 'literacy'. In ENViL it was decided to make use of the definition of visual literacy as given by Brill, Kim and Branch (2001, p.9):
"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."

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. It would have been perfect when a concept would have been available that unequivocally refers to the unique character of the visual domain.

Criticism on the use of visual literacy

When in February 2015 the final conclusion, including the framework and model, were presented at the ENViL congress in Budapest, the first serious criticism of this notion was worded by the invited speaker Bernard Darras form the Sorbonne University. He indicated that with the term 'literacy', even today, it is hard to escape the phonetic and semantic similarity between 'literacy' and its source: literature, letter, illiterate. "The problem gets worse with translation into Latin languages. For example, in French, the phrase Visual Literacy translates into the term, 'alphabetisation visuelle', (or, more rarely, by 'culture visuelle'). In Spanish they say 'alfabetización visual'. In Italian it is 'alfabetizzazione visiva' and in Portuguese, 'alfabetização visual', or, more literally 'literacia visual'." (Darras, 2016, p. 381) From a scientific point of view he also referred to the fact that this close connection with the linguistic and literary world has already wreaked havoc, by suggesting that images function like texts and should be studied as such. Hence the proliferation of ideas and concepts around visual text, visual grammar, image grammar, code, and even image language, image rhetoric and image reading, and so on. Darras, himself a semiotician, warned ENViL for throwing themselves in the lion's mouth. Put differently: "the notion of literacy delivers the visual domain to the non-understanding patriots of the linguistic domain." (Darras, 2016, p.382) "There is thus both an effect of reproduction, and also of cognitive and disciplinary domination, which favors all disciplines that conform to the linguistic model and which reduces and molds all the nonverbal disciplines to the principles of this dominant model. (…) [I]mages are not perceived like text or speech." (ibid.)

But others as well expressed their surprise that supporters of visual education make use of a concept that is based in the linguistic symbol world, not in the visual. It even led to

misunderstanding of its ambition, up to the idea that the framework is only about understanding images and art.

The alternative: visual competency

When developing the Framework the researchers of ENVIL decided to take the concept of 'competency' as its main building stone. But also the notion of 'competency' generated a problem. To many the concept of 'competency' is related to the neo-liberal political agenda to make education more economically effective, and thus the instrument of a limited view on education. But is this true? Are not all educational agendas very much aware of the *non*-economic needs in education, being these social, civic, cultural or personal. Even the OECD (PISA) is very much aware of these needs, and not only for economic reasons – unless we follow Marx and see any idea introduced by the ones in power as a tool to only defend their own case, and approach those without power as ignorants. Secondly, the notion of 'competency' has its basis in educational and psychological research on how people learn and can learn more effectively. The combined use of knowledge, skills, personal characteristics and attitudes to act effectively in a situation is a most helpful way to look at the what, the how and the why of education. So the notion of competency is a fruitful one, until the moment and better concept comes along.

Therefore a framework related to 'Visual Competency' is much more to the point and more communicative than the oxymoron of 'Visual Literacy'. It precisely covers what the subject is all about: becoming competent in the domain of visual representation. It also introduces an active approach: competency is about doing, in which knowledge, skills and attitude interact, where literacy is about knowledge and ability only.

Visual

Which leaves a final word on the concept of 'visual'. This word is sometimes seen as too broad, as it includes everything seen by the eye, including the inner eye. Texts, numbers, natural and man-made objects, but also dreams and imagination in one's mind are all part of the visual domain. But visual competency does not address all these types of input or activities in our visual system. On the other hand the traditional concentration on 'visual art and design' is seen as too limited, as much more objects are made with the intention to influence human behavior by means of their visual characteristics. Also, many visual art objects are closely related to the sense of touch (sculpture, textile art), proprioceptive sense (architecture, design) or presented in close relationship with other art forms or senses (theatre, opera, film). To make things more complicated in conceptual

art the notion of visual perception is sometimes denied or superseded. Where does this leave the 'visual'? First it can be stated, that visual competency concentrates on the visual aspect or experience in the first place, but not exclusively. When the tactile, the musical, or the proprioceptive sense take the lead another type of competency will be the main tool. On the other hand, to see things is a basic skill that all human beings are normally able to do without learning. But to see and visualize things in a specific way is the actual competency that is central in the domain of visual learning. To determine what is 'specific' and how it is possible to make things that have 'specific' visual characteristics or how to experience objects with 'specific' characteristics in the first place, is the core business of visual competency. Put in this way it leaves open all kind of views on the role of the visual domain in education, the case of the artistic and the diversity in materials, approaches and subdomains that currently are covered by the great diversity of school subjects in Europe related to this domain.

ENViL remains ENViL

At the same meeting in Paris it was decided to keep the name of the network as it is: European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL). In this name 'Visual Literacy' refers to the broad domain of school subjects and areas of learning that relate to the visual and to visual symbol formation and understanding of visual images. This choice also underlines the fact that the Framework is *an* interpretation of what the domain could be all about. The domain of Visual Literacy can be understood and represented in other ways than by means of 'competencies'.

References

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