Towards a Revised Model of the Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Competency.

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Abstract

In 2016 the European Network for Visual Literacy published the prototype of a Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy (Wagner & Schönau 2016). This Framework is based on the analysis of 37 curricula in the domain of visual learning in 22 European countries. The leading instrument of analysis used in this analysis is the concept of 'competency'. The Framework presents sixteen sub-competencies, covering all aspects of learning in the domain Visual Literacy. In this article the concept of competency and the sixteen sub-competencies as presented in the prototype of the Framework are reviewed and structured in a more generic and coherent format. This new format will make it easier to apply the Framework for educational situations, curriculum development, and further discussion.

Towards a new version of the Framework

In 2016 the European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL) published a prototype of a Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy (CEFR-VL) (Wagner & Schönau 2016).[1] 'Visual Literacy' is a neutral umbrella term that covers all (school) subjects in the domain of visual learning, without giving preference to any theoretical, ideological or educational point of view. This domain embraces learning with regard to all types of man-made 'images', being these two-dimensional, three-dimensional or moving, artistic or commercial, ideological or propagandistic, informative or manipulative, etc. As the concept of 'literacy' covers a variety of unintended connotations ENViL decided to rename this Framework into Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Competency. The name of the Framework now more specifically refers to its main approach to analyse curricula: the use of the concept of 'competency'. In the research project 37 curricula from 22 different European countries (including Turkey) were analysed, focusing on the use of the concept of 'competency' and related descriptions of intended learning in this domain (Kirchner & Haanstra 2016; Kichner, Gotta-Keger & Nockmann 2016).

Figures 1 and 2 give a visual summary of what the resulting prototype of the Framework looks like (Wagner & Schönau 2016: 66-79).

<Insert: Figure 1: The ENViL competency model: basic dimensions (Wagner & Schönau 2016: 66)>

In the centre of the model (Figure 1) we find the two sub-domains in the domain of Visual Literacy: 'producing' work yourself and 'responding' to work made by others. These two are the basic constituents that also imply the main division within the domain. The competencies of domain of Visual Literacy two sub-domains are function along with the more generic personal, methodological, and social competencies. These represent all types of competencies that play a role in any action or (learning) situation and that are relevant for all school subjects.

Competency

At the bottom of Figure 1 we see 'knowledge', 'skills' and 'attitudes'. The interactive use of these three elements together with the 'situation' in which they are applied define the concept of

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[1] ENViL has been able to develop this prototype thanks to a grant of the European Union (2014-2016).

competency. A 'situation' can be understood as an environment (personal, educational, professional, social) interpreted by a person or group of persons. This interpretation is influenced by the physical and social aspects of the environment and the characteristics and the intention of the person(s) interpreting the environment. 'Knowledge' and 'skills' need further definition and elaboration at school level, as the domain of Visual Literacy is so broad and varied that a fixed description of its content is impossible as well as ineffective. What is learned in this domain has to be defined at curriculum level or at school level. Attitudes refer to what has been defined by Weinert as the 'associated motivational, volitional and social willingness and skills required to use the solutions successfully and responsibly in changing situations.' (Weinert 2001, p, 27 ff.).

In Figure 1, above the centre, 'reflect', or 'meta-cognition', is hovering, thus indicating its central role as a 'monitoring' competency that is active and relevant in any moment of life and learning.

<Insert: Figure 2: The ENViL competency model: differentiation of sub-competencies (Wagner & Schönau 2016: 68).>

In Figure 2 sixteen so-called 'sub-competencies' are presented: *analyse, communicate, create, describe, draft, empathise, envision, experience aesthetically, experiment, interpret, judge, perceive, present, realise, use and value*. These sub-competencies turned out to be the most often mentioned or the most important in the curricula as analysed. Some are typical for production of images, other for responding to visual images, but many competencies can be applied to both sub-domains. At this point of detailing the framework the research project ended, as there was neither time nor money left for further development.

Basic considerations for reorganizing the Framework

As can be seen in Figure 2 the sub-competencies are presented as a kind of concept cloud, with no internal structure or hierarchy. In the past years a working group of ENViL has investigated the possibility to make this cloud of concepts more insightful to generate a more practical version for use in classrooms and in curriculum development. To arrive at a better and more insightful model, the working group based its activities on the following considerations.

First, it was agreed that the sub-competencies could better be reformulated into terms of competencies, not just as verbs only. A competency is more than a verb, which normally refers to an activity that only requires a specific skill (e.g. '*make*'). A competency, by definition, does not only

consist of skills, but also of knowledge and attitudes.

Secondly, it is more logical and helpful to formulate the sub-competencies in terms that are relevant and typical for learning in the visual domain, to distinguish them from those used in other school subjects or domains of learning.

Finally, the working group has looked for ways to present these competencies not as an amorphous cloud, but in a structure that reflects the dynamic character of the visual domain (and its sub-domains) as well as the (potential) interrelatedness of the different sub-competencies.

We presumed that the distinction between the sub-domains 'producing' and 'responding' had to be clarified. It was decided to develop two different models, one for each sub-domain. This meant that only sub-competencies relevant for each domain were included in the models. This division does not mean that producing and responding should be approached as separate domains in education, on the contrary. Examples of work made by others can be very relevant in one's own work. But in some education systems the domain of responding is addressed in separate school subjects like art history, cultural and artistic education or critical studies. Also in museum education the domain of 'responding' is central. By developing two separate models the dynamics and characteristics of each sub-domain are revealed in a more cohesive way.

The sub-domain of 'producing'

Following this approach it makes sense to group the sub-competencies for the sub-domain of 'producing' into five more generic competencies related to different phases in the production process. These new sub-competencies not only fulfil the considerations above, but also represent a logic that is recognizable to both learners and professionals in the domain.

The five new generic sub-competencies in the sub-subdomain of 'producing' are:

- the competency to generate visual ideas;

- the competency to do visual research;

- the competency to make visual images;

- the competency to present one's images;

- the competency to evaluate one's images and image-making processes.

The order is not prescriptive but reflects the most common way of working. Some stages can in some cases be skipped and others stages can be repeated, when for instance a work does not fit the

expectations of the maker and she or he has to go through the process again. The concept 'visual' is also used here to refer to the haptic, motor and kinaesthetic aspects of objects and processes in the visual domain, as for instance in making and experiencing three-dimensional objects or architecture.

The first new generic sub-competency - *to generate visual ideas* - covers what a maker in the domain of Visual Literacy normally does before embarking on the actual production process. Just starting to make an image without any preliminary thinking or research is rather uncommon. In most cases there will be an idea, an experience, an emotion, a practical or an ideational purpose or request. The starting point can be an observation, but it can also be a product of the mind: an idea, a fantasy, a mental image, an experience or a feeling. It can also be an urge to investigate the expressive materials and techniques, or to make an image or object with a specific practical function. Although in many cases the purpose of the image to be made may not be clear at the beginning, in the end a maker will start to produce a work that fits a 'situation', being this artistic, commercial, educational, recreational, social or otherwise. In this phase the following original sub-competencies can play a role: *analyse, communicate, describe, empathise, envision, experience aesthetically, interpret, perceive.* Which of these sub-competencies actually play in role will depend on where, when and how a maker is inspired, triggered or requested to make an image. Each of the original sub-competencies can play a role in this phase, depending on the starting point or the moment in the process.

The second generic sub-competency - *to do visual research* - relates to all practical and material activities a maker can undertake before the actual work is produced: making drafts, experimenting with elements and principles, materials and/or techniques, looking for available images and ideas that might fit into the work, analysing how things work out visually and interpreting the results of sketches. In this phase the original sub-competencies *analyse*, *communicate*, *create*, *draft*, *experiment*, *interpret* and *use* can play a role.

In the third phase – *making a visual image* - the work is actually produced. Of course a work can be created from scratch, without any intentional generation of visual ideas or preliminary research, but more often the 'final' work is based on a preceding process of investigation and trials. In this phase the original sub-competencies *communicate*, *create*, *realise* and *use* play the major role. It is important to keep in mind that especially in this phase the competency of *reflection* is crucial: what appears in the process of creation will be judged and corrected by the maker with regard to its visual characteristics and expressiveness. With good reasons one may say that this is the moment in which the act of

creation is at its peak.

The fourth phase - *presenting one's images* - will start when the maker has decided that the work is 'finished' and the assignment is completed. Depending on the social situation and the purpose of the assignment the maker will present the result in a specific way. This presentation can be limited to the final work itself, but it can also include preliminary studies, experiments, and research that have led to the final work. Because of this complexity of the production process and of the visual character of the work made, presenting can be regarded as a productive and even creative activity in its own right. The activities related to the phase of presenting can be addressed by the original sub-competencies *communicate*, *describe*, *judge*, *present*, *realise* and *value.*

The fifth new generic sub-competency - *to evaluate one's images and image-making processes* - can be seen as a typical phase in a learning situation, but it also applies to any other situation in which a maker looks back at what (s)he has done and made. This looking back might lead to a reappraisal of the working process and even to a decision to start all over again when the result is not in line with the intention or the expectation. In an educational context, the competency to evaluate is crucial in the communication between student and teacher, as it informs both parties about what has been learned and how to move forward. It is the phase in which the original sub-competencies *analyse*, *communicate*, *describe*, *judge* and *value* can be applied.

The sub-domain of 'responding'

With regard to the sub-domain of 'responding' not all sixteen sub-competencies are equally relevant. The sub-competencies *create, draft, envision, experiment and realise* are typical for producing a work. The other sub-competencies can be used in both domains (Wagner & Schönau 2016: 89-90). So eleven sub-competencies are relevant in the sub-domain of 'responding': *analyse, communicate, describe, empathise, experience aesthetically, interpret, judge, perceive, present, use and value*.

Like in the domain of 'producing', also in the domain of 'responding' we can see a temporal order of activities, from the first encounter with an image[2], through a scrutiny of what can be seen and be known about this image, up to drawing of conclusions in an informed way and sometimes ending with a presentation of the results, either orally, in written form, or in another visual format. This process is

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[2] 'Image' in the context of the ENViL model refers to all types of two- or three-dimensional objects and processes that are relevant for the domain of visual learning. See also Wagner & Schönau 2016: 70.

not arbitrary as it follows a 'natural' order in which the observer tries to make sense of the image at hand. This process can be made more sophisticated and systematic by following specific rules for (visual) research in order to arrive at insights and conclusions that can be understood by and shared with others.

We suggest to redistribute the eleven sub-competencies related to the domain of 'responding' into to four distinct temporal phases: perceive, research, evaluate and communicate. Based on this sub-division the working group has come forward with four more generic competencies that not only fulfil the basic considerations as outlined above, but also represent a logic that is recognizable to both learners and professionals in the domain.

The four (new) generic competencies in the sub-domain of 'responding' are:

- the competency to look at images;

- the competency to research images;

- the competency to evaluate images;

- the competency to report about images.

In contrast with the structure in the domain of 'producing' the activities related to these four new competencies would be executed in a more strict order. Research without good looking at the image first, judging without research and reporting about an image without any of these preceding activities cannot produce good results and can even be seen as a demonstration of incompetence. Of course it is always possible to return to an earlier phase to adjust or improve one's observations, insights or conclusions, but in the end the process should always start with observation and end with reporting.

The first new generic sub-competency - *to look at images* – relates to the multifaceted character of visual perception in the domain of visual literacy: looking carefully at an image, experiencing the visual qualities that makes this image 'powerful' in a visual and/or artistic way, and connecting emotionally with what is there to be seen. This first new competency relates to the phase in which a 'new' image is seen *as an image*, before any additional information is intentionally looked for to arrive at a deeper understanding of the image. It is the moment in which the original sub-competencies of *perceiving*, *aesthetically perceiving* and *empathising* play a central role.

The next phase – to research images – is needed to arrive at a deeper and more complete understanding. Research with regard to an image can be understood in the same way as research in science: a systematic exploration. Here the object of study is the meaning(s) of (or in) the image, its

purpose, the way this 'meaning' is expressed by the visual characteristics of the image, and the contextual information that supports a better understanding about the reasons why the image is made and why it is made in this specific way. Contextual information can be found in comments by the maker or by critics, in historical sources, and in social, political, psychological, philosophical and other texts and theories that might be applicable to the image. Research with regard to the unique visual qualities of the image can help generate an informed understanding of the image. This can relate to its content and purpose as well as to its form and unique visual qualities. The sub-competency of researching images is related to the sub-competencies *analyse, describe and interpret.* These three sub-competencies cover the dynamic steps taken in researching an image. Describing is a very helpful and fundamental sub-competency as it helps to find words for what is seen, also at different levels of detail. Analysis and interpretation are two sides of the same coin: making sense of what is found, and combining what can be seen in the image with what can be known or understood about the image.

The third new sub-competency – evaluating an image - plays an important role in the domain of Visual Literacy. Evaluating addresses the issue of quality. In the domain of Visual Literacy 'quality' plays a fundamental role. It refers to what makes an image relevant, successful and powerful. This is an essential characteristic of learning in the visual domain that distinguishes it from the scientific disciplines in which quantification is the essential approach to arrive at understanding, proof, prediction and even 'universal truth', as laws in nature are valid in the whole universe. In the domain of Visual Literacy the 'truth' of an image relates to that image only. It is possible to do scientific research of visual phenomena like in the psychology of perception but that is nor the content nor the ambition of Visual Literacy in the educational domain. To evaluate means to assign a 'value' to an image. The sub-competency of evaluating images includes the original sub-competencies of *judging* and *valuing*. *Judging* refers to the use of criteria, being these aesthetic, ethic, political, legal, economic, etc. to arrive at a systematic appreciation or estimation of an image in a comprehensible and intersubjective way. *Valuing* is the more subjective appreciation in which the image is appreciated for its uniqueness and its expressive qualities, as well as for its contribution to one's own life or to the life of others or society at large. The sub-competency to evaluate an image is used to appreciate an image as a contribution to one's own understanding and enrichment, or as a contribution to other individuals, groups or society at large. It is particularly significant in intercultural or transcultural contexts.

The fourth new sub-competency (to report about images), relates to the presentation of the results

of the other three sub-competencies. It involves the original sub-competencies *communicate*, *present* and *use*. The final stage in the sub-domain of responding specifically refers to this notion of sharing with an audience what has been observed, researched and evaluated. This sharing ('*reporting*') is normally done through language, but it can also be done by means of images, gestures or other signs ('*use*'). As in the revision of the competencies in the productive domain the final stage is reformulated as 'the competency to present', it seems more in place to use the verb 'report' in its technical sense here: to share conclusions or to exchange (written) information. Being competent in sharing the results of one's observations, research and evaluation therefore can be perfectly subsumed in the new sub-competency to report about images in an informed way. However, we should note that 'reporting' may also take the form of an internal act of arriving at an insight about an image, without sharing it with others. This act of formulating an informed opinion, is equally valuable as a result of art education. Reporting is useful for social knowledge distribution, but an informed opinion that guides future actions (like frequenting art shows or safeguarding monuments) is equally important.

Finally, in the sub-domain of responding special attention should be given to the fact that responding to existing images can be approached in two ways: from a historical and from a contemporary angle. When an image is approached as a historical artefact one needs to make use of historical sources to arrive at a 'correct' or at least data driven understanding of the origin, goal, content and design of the image when it was made. However, when an image is approached as an artefact that is still relevant today, other sources will be needed. This is especially the case when a selection of existing images is made by a museum for a presentation or exhibition for a contemporary public. Here the perspective of the museum, the curator or the scholar determines what is presented and how. Contemporary theories and practices will determine how images are presented ('curated') as part of the actual debate, discourse or developments. Thus curating an exhibition can be seen as an activity in the final phase of the responsive domain of Visual Literacy (*use* images, etc.). Writing the accompanying catalogue or research can be seen as the final 'reporting' phase in the responding domain.

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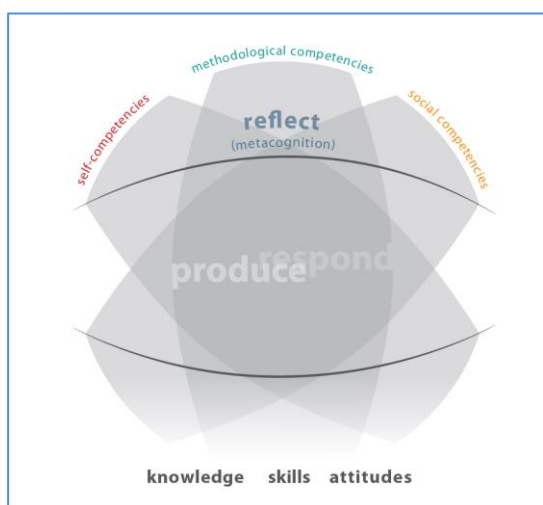   Weinert (Hg.), *Leistunsgmessung in Schulen* (pp.17-31). Weinheim/Basel: Beltz.

Figure 1

Figure 2