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### Remarks on the Preface<sup>1</sup>

The Preface to the book on *Art- Ethics –Education* (Buschkühle, Atkinson & Vella 2020: ix-xii) relates the idea for this book to its origin: the Working Group on Theory of the European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL). This working group was founded as an offspring of the project of ENViL to develop a prototype of a Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy (CEFR-VL) (Wagner & Schönau 2106).<sup>2</sup> After the project had been completed, members of ENViL agreed to embark on in-depth discussions with regard to the theoretical basis of the Framework and on the domain of visual learning and literacy in general.

Normally a theoretical discussion precedes a research project, but the researchers of ENViL decided, for a series of reasons, to work on a joint research project first. As theme of interest in this research the concept of ‘competency’ was chosen, as this concept is used in many international educational research projects but its use in visual literacy/art education has never been systematically assessed. To focus the research project (and get funding) and also generate practical results to support curriculum development, it was decided to develop a competency-related Framework of Reference based on what is common in contemporary European curricula in the domain of visual literacy. The idea for such a framework was inspired by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001). The idea was also related to international discussions on commonalities and comparability of education systems, triggered by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000, as well as by the project initiated by the European Union to develop Key Competences for Life-Long Learning in the domain of vocational education (LLL) (European Union 2018). Now the prototype of the ENViL Framework had been published it was time to ask further questions with regard to the theoretical foundations of the issues that came across in the research project. The book of Buschkühle and his colleagues is the first substantial result of the Working Group and a highly needed step to strengthen the common ground of the visual literacy school subjects.

In the Preface to the book on *Art – Ethics – Education*, the authors give a critical review of the theoretical position taken by ENViL in its research project for the CEFR-VL, as well of the views of some of its participants. However, this review is in need of some corrections. As a preliminary remark it must be kept in mind that what is written in the Preface was only incidentally discussed in the ENViL research project and not discussed in the Working Group on Theory. With the publication of this book and this comment the discussion is far from completed.

First, the authors remark that “several members of this network subscribe to the view about curriculum development and assessment introduced by PISA introduced with the aim of evaluating and providing comparable data about educational systems and policies around the world.” (Buschkühle e.a. 2020: IX). Whatever the validity of this observation, it must be noted, that the underlying ideas of PISA have never been the aim of the ENViL research project. Discussions on the

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<sup>1</sup> This text was kindly provided to ENViL by Brill Publisher and can be found on the ENViL website.

<sup>2</sup> In the ENViL publication, ‘visual literacy’ is used to refer to all school subjects in European education related to learning in the visual domain (comparable to ‘art education’), as well as to the general ‘visual competency’ resulting from learning in this domain.

content and quality of education systems and practices have a much broader scope. Social cohesion, civic engagement, personal unfolding and employability are relevant in all societies and thus in all education systems. That these generic goals might show up in PISA as well, does not disqualify their existence as goals in any other view on education. Here it must be added that the PISA research has been of importance for ENViL, not because of its philosophy or its goal (comparing the success of education systems), but because of its impact on politicians and the importance given to lists of educational and economic 'successful' countries. The political and economic urge to compare education systems and the resulting rat-race to the top was, and still is, a great concern if not threat to the domain of visual literacy. To defend the domain from being seen by politicians and non-art related professionals as idiosyncratic and with no common theoretical grounds, ways of thinking and working, it is of the utmost importance to show what is the underlying commonality in knowledge, skills and attitudes addressed in this domain of learning.

ENViL decided to take the concept of 'competency' as its focus, as this concept had become such a widely used tool to refer to what students are supposed to learn in the domains of mathematics, science, reading in mother tongue (PISA), second language (CEFR-L), and vocational education (LLL). Many curricula in the visual arts in Europe refer to or include 'competencies' as well. In the ENViL project 'competency' is defined as the "combined use of learnable knowledge, skills and attitudes... demonstrated in specific (professional) situations." (Wagner & Schönau 2017: 98). The definition of competency as given and used by ENViL is valid in any learning situation. And what is the use of education when the acquired knowledge, skills and attitudes cannot be applied in a relevant situation in an integrated way?

The concept of 'competency' can be seen as a helpful tool to overcome the focus on 'knowledge' and 'skills' as separate entities in curriculum descriptions. In the introduction to the ENViL Framework publication it is stated that "... the starting point for the collaborative efforts is the observation that there are no convincing foundations for competency-based curriculum development in the domain of Visual Literacy. Although most country-specific curricula for teaching in the subjects that are responsible for Visual Literacy are competency-based, there is not only a lack of exchange of experiences but also a lack of a common foundation in academically substantiated knowledge and conceptual discourse, as well as links to current discourse in curriculum theory and pedagogy." (Wagner & Schönau 2016: 64). Finding common ground in the conceptual concepts used and the sub-areas covered in this learning domain would hopefully contribute to arrive at a Reference Framework that would enable the researchers, the practitioners and the policy makers to communicate in common language. It would also help the related school subjects to connect with current educational discussions and not being left out as a sub-domain of learning subject to the idiosyncrasies of education systems, teachers, and politicians.

The authors of the Preface relate competencies to "a pragmatic approach, focusing on assessing and comparing students competences and their life-long learning beyond compulsory schooling." (Buschkühle e.a.: IX). This is their interpretation. The main objection is, that the notion of 'competency' is characteristic for a "neo-liberal" approach to education. But the fact that the concept of 'competency' originated in the world of job selection and vocational education, does not mean that it reflects "neo-liberal" thinking (its older than that), nor that it is impossible to make good use of this concept in other views on education, including the domain of visual literacy. Likewise, the concept of 'money' can be related to the world of "capitalism", but it is also a very useful concept in non-capitalist societies. The need to find "comparable data" (Buschkühle e.a. 2020, IX) was not in the

agenda of the ENViL project. The only data researched was the use of ‘competencies’ in the descriptions of 32 official curricula for the visual learning domain school in 22 countries. The approach advocated by the authors of the Preface also involves (critical) attitudes, artistic knowledge and skills of their students. The development of competencies does not say anything about the best way to do so, nor does it exclude situations in which the rules of the game are critically addressed. Education is more than the development of competencies, but without competencies (or knowledge, skills and attitudes, for that matter), there is little reason left to develop visual competency in school.

The authors also criticize the “tendency < of a pragmatic approach > to reduce phenomena to measurable skills.” (Buschkühle e.a. 2020: X). The issue of “measurement” is a critical issue in (visual) education, but by now also the researchers of PISA have come to the insight that quantification through written tests is not the holy grail to compare the success of education systems. In the end any quantification is an abstraction of underlying qualitative data and interpretations. The issue of measurability should not prevent attempts within the domain of visual literacy to compare curricula and learning results. At student level, the issue of measurability is reflected in ENViL’s proposal to introduce levels or standards, as well as in giving examples in the publication itself of rubrics to assess individual student work.<sup>3</sup> Although this might suggest an issue how to ‘measure’ when a student has reached the ‘minimum level’, these levels are only meant to open up discussions on improvement in visual literacy. In the ENViL research the ‘measurement’ is discussed in terms of ‘assessment’. Education without assessment is impossible, as an educator needs to make sure if her or his activities have resulted in a change in the students behaviour, respectively in an increase in competencies.

The authors propose a view in which “art educators initiate processes that encourage learners to discover ways of being resistant to an artistic grammar, tracing new visual paths through territories that are still unreadable.” (id.) “Artistic grammar” is seen (or presented) here as a kind of prescriptive, standards-related body of knowledge and skills that limit students in their options to explore new domains. On the other hand the author also agrees that we should not “disavow established skills, knowledge, techniques and practices.” (id.). The competencies as described in the Framework, however, are just that: descriptions of “skills, knowledge, technique and practices” formulated in terms of competencies to underline the need of the combined use of its constituting elements in relevant situations. “Tracing new paths through territories that are still unreadable” can be one of those situations. It is up to the teacher and the student to present or enter such situations when needed or helpful. The ENViL Framework, however, is also been developed to support learning in other situations in which readability is most relevant, when a maker addresses a situation in which he or she wants to visually communicate a message, make something beautiful or practical, tell a story, present a personal impression or emotion, visualize information, support activities or attract attention and in which ‘unreadability’ would lead to non-communication, misunderstanding or aversion. The world of visual image-making is broader than what happens in the world of museums and in art that is ‘disobedient’. In art education learning to make images starts at age 4, as soon as students are invited to visualize their experiences, ideas, and dreams. The development of visual competency does not start in upper secondary or higher education, where some students might become able and inspired to challenge the “established skills, knowledge, techniques and practices” and become “disobedient” artists. Like in music, theater and dance, also in the visual arts it needs a

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<sup>3</sup> See the contributions of Groenendijk and Haanstra in Wagner & Schönau (2016), pp. 292-318.

firm basis of knowledge, great versatility in techniques and skills, and long experience in combining these aspects in challenging situations, before one is able to surpass the “artistic grammar” and still be communicative. Being “disobedient” cannot be the ultimate goal of learning in visual literacy. Being competent means that one knows what one is doing - even in being disobedient. Thus the concept of competency has an ethical dimension by definition, as knowing what one is doing always involves an awareness of the consequences of one’s actions, being these traditional, “pragmatic” or disobedient.

## References

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