

Visual Literacy and the experience of art

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This presentation is about a unique school subject in the arts that has been introduced in Dutch education some twenty years ago: appreciating the arts. This subject is unique because it relates to the actual experience of products of all different types of art, being these visual arts, music, dance, theatre, architecture, film, pop concerts, video art, and all other products that can be approached as 'art'. It is also unique as it is a final examination subject. And to make it even more special: all students have to take this subject!

In this presentation I will relate this subject to the Common European Framework for Visual Literacy that has been published last year by ENViL, European Network for Visual Literacy ENViL ¹. Visual Literacy, as a term, covers all varieties of art education subjects, from art to design, from drawing to art history, from visual culture to film, from textile art to handicraft.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy (CEFR-VL)

The ENViL framework is meant to provide a common theoretical basis for what all Europeans should know and be able to do with regard to man-made visual objects and images. These objects and images include also what is commonly known as 'art', but the description 'visual' in Visual Literacy already suggests that the range of images and objects that is covered by this framework is much broader.

The ENViL framework - which actually has the status of a prototype – is based on the concept of competencies. A competency is the ability to apply knowledge, skills and attitudes in situations that are relevant to the individual and to society and in which images, objects and visual signs are used. The element of 'situation' is crucial, as one can only apply one's competency in a situation that demands for specific action. The same skills and knowledge that are effective in one situation might turn out to be ineffective in a different situation.

The framework acts as a model that systematizes and structures these competencies. Where possible, the competencies have been described at three levels: an elementary level that everybody should reach, a 'competent' level describing what characterizes a fully visually literate European citizen, and an intermediate level in between.

In the framework a main division is made between competencies related to the production of work (normally known as studio work) and to the reception of work (the way we look at visual images, including art). Although this split reflects the position of the maker on the one side and the observer on the other, this is not as simple as it seems. The 'observer' is the person to whom the work is addressed. But this observer can take several positions with regard to the art work. It is not without

¹ Wagner, Ernst & Schönau, Diederik (Hrsg.) (2016), *Cadre Européen Commun de Référence pour la Visual Literacy-Prototype, Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy - Prototype, Gemeinsamer Europäischer Referenzrahmen für Visual Literacy- Prototyp*, Münster/New York: Waxmann

reason that in the theory of discipline based art education (DBAE), in which professionals use their disciplines to approach art, next to the artist, the position of the art critic, the art philosopher and the art historian are presented as three types of observers. But these are all professionals. But we also have to take into account the general public, the interested observer or citizen who goes to a museum or a gallery, who enters a building, or who buys objects and clothes that have been designed. Which brings me to CKV.

CKV

The history of CKV goes back some twenty years. In the nineties a political discussion led to a fundamental reform of Dutch secondary education. As part of this reform also the arts were looked critically. A new question arose: What should students know and understand in order to appreciate art? This question has been answered by the introduction of CKV, the Dutch acronym of 'cultural and artistic education'.² This is a subject that concentrates on the role of the observer or the public with regard to the arts – all the arts. As to this moment, August 2017, a revised final examination program for CKV has become effective. The revision was needed to make CKV more demanding and more interesting for students. The programme is formulated in terms of 'can do'-statements, stating what the student is able to do. Therefore a comparison with the competency-based approach of the ENViL framework is quite well possible. In what follows I will compare this revised examination program of CKV with the ENViL framework to see in what way this subject fits the model developed by ENViL, and in what way theory can learn from practice.

The purpose of CKV is to have students learn to actively experience, enjoy and understand the arts by letting them take part actively in a variety of artistic expressions and experiences.

In the revised examination programme 'experiencing' has to be understood in three ways. In the first place it relates to the active and *real life* participation in art by taking part in visits to museums, architecture or presentations or by going to film, concerts or theatre performances.

Secondly, this participation is seen as a *productive process* that demands an active involvement of the students, and the use of relevant knowledge and skills.

Finally, as the meaning of art and culture is never fixed, taking part in artistic and cultural activities is seen as both an experience and a creative process that demands for an open and *inquisitive attitude*.

To develop such an open attitude and process-based approach the subject is divided into four domains, arranged and formulated in such a way that teachers and students have to adapt a process-oriented way of working: to explore – to broaden – to deepen – to connect.

In the first domain, the domain of 'exploration', students learn to describe their own experiences with art, their own artistic interests, and their knowledge of and ideas about art, to reflect on these experiences, and to document the results. Students are also expected to think about the way their own interests in 'art' have been formed, and how these interests relate to those of others, including their peers in the classroom.

² For the Dutch text of the examination programme:
http://www.slo.nl/downloads/archief/Examenprogramma__CKV__DEFINITIEF.pdf

In the next domain (or next step) students have to broaden their view and knowledge and to develop 'a creative and inquisitive attitude' by opening themselves to new experiences and stepping out of their comfort zone. This is done by going to places where professional art is presented or performances are given. Students are asked to appreciate what they experience and to arrive at their own judgements. Students have to investigate these artistic encounters by making use of dimensions or contrast in which art can manifest itself: fact or fiction, traditional or innovative, autonomous or applied, analogical or digital, beauty or ugliness, etc.

In the third domain students have to deepen their experience, knowledge and skills, by investigating (aspects of) an artistic creative process. In this domain students can make use of sources in different media, their own cultural surroundings and their knowledge of art theory and cultural history as acquired in the step before (broadening the view). They can do their investigations by means of practical activities, interviews, reflective research, analysing background information, etc. The research can relate to an art work, but also to the role of the maker or the mediator involved, being these the composer, director, dancer, the curator, the programmer, etc.

In the fourth domain students make connections between what they have done in the other three domains, and what these experiences and insights have contributed to their own cultural and artistic and cultural development, understanding and appreciation. They can do so by giving a presentation of their personal reflection in a talk, a film, a presentation, a (digital) report or in a combination of these formats.

Depending on the time available and the complexity of the investigation, several research cycles can be executed.

Comparing CKV with the CEFR-VL

In the ENViL framework sixteen different subcompetencies are described which either relate to the production of images and objects, to their reception or to both. The choice of these competencies is based on a thorough analysis of 32 curricula in the domain of Visual Literacy (art, design, art history, etc.) in 22 European countries. As in many curricula a division is made between making (studio work) and analysing work made by others (mostly artists), it is not surprising that in the ENViL framework a main division is made between production and reception. But how does this relate to the competencies needed to experience art as art, not as a subject for further critical analysis?

Of the sixteen subcompetencies of the ENViL model some nine seem directly relevant for the generic competency to experience art in a fruitful way. They represent three or four phases in the process of experiencing art. Three subcompetencies relate to the first phase in which the experience of art takes place: *empathise*, *perceive* and *experience aesthetically*. One could also describe these three subcompetencies as a more general competency to open one's mind to the artistic aspect of what is presented to the eyes. The next three subcompetencies relate to the looking for reasons why a work is appealing and artistically interesting. These are the subcompetencies to *describe*, *analyse* and *interpret*. They relate to the reflection on why a work of art is interesting, successful or relevant. The third phase include two subcompetencies: to *judge* and to *value*. Judgement is based on criteria, reflecting what can be seen as aspects or even standards to what makes a work of art successful.

Valuing is broader: it places the art work in a wider cultural context, presenting its worth as a cultural object. A final phase is the subcompetency to *present* the results of one's 'endeavours'. This is typical for a didactic or commercial situation. In daily life few people will formally present the results of their experience with art.

How do these subcompetencies relate to what is described in the examination program of CKV?

In the first step in CKV students are asked to explore. The verbs used in the examination programme are: describe, reflect and report or present. As to the content, students have to concentrate on their personal experiences, interests, knowledge and ideas about art - in its broadest sense – and how these relate to those of others, among them their classmates, by comparing. So valuing is already popping up in descriptive way by comparing.

The second step (or domain, as it is named in the program) relates to broadening one's view. The competencies or verbs used are: to contemplate or view, to value to report. This is partly done by taking part in an artistic presentation or performance. The notion of contemplation or viewing is missing in the CEFR-VL. To actually take part in art live can be equalled to the subcompetencies *empathise*, *perceive*, and *experience aesthetically*. The reflection on this experience can be described in terms of *describing* and *analysing*. To value can also be found in the CERF-VL. The results of this phase have to be presented in one way or another.

In the third phase students have to go into depth. The verbs and therefore subcompetencies used in the CKV program are research, analyse, create, use, contextualise, document and to account. When comparing these with the framework we could state that research is covered by the subcompetencies *analyse* and *interpret*. In CKV *analyse* is seen as an aspect of research, document and account as part of the subcompetency *present* in the framework. *Use* and *create* are equally used as subcompetencies in the framework. The only verb that cannot be related to the framework is contextualize: putting things in context. This context can be of any kind: social, cultural, economic, religious, psychological, educational, legal or theoretical.

In the final phase or domain of CKV students have to connect what they have found and learned in the first three phases and to relate these insights to their own ideas and cultural development and to what art is or can be. The verbs used are connect, indicate and clarify. These are missing as subcompetencies in the framework, but indicate and clarify could be seen as aspects of *presenting*. To connect is missing in the framework. Interestingly, in the National Core Arts Standards in the United States, this competency to connect is included as a separate domain. But there it has broader meaning as it not only relates to making connections to one's own experiences and ideas, but also to the external context. But this is covered by the competency in the CKV program to contextualize.

Conclusion

This brief overview does not go into all the details of both the CKV examination program and the CEFR-VL. But when we concentrate on the main characteristics of both documents we can arrive at some preliminary conclusions.

CKV introduces a way of learning about and through art that has not been part of the CEFR-VL: how to learn to appreciate and enjoy art, not only how to make or understand or respond to it. One could

say that the main purpose of CKV is covered by *experiencing aesthetically*, but then we should be aware that this experience takes place in a live situation in which students are aware of the artistic mechanisms used to generate such an experience. But CKV is more: it advocates a creative approach in how to arrive at this goal, by inviting students to do research into the working process of professionals in all phases and roles of the artistic domain and creative industry.

As we have seen, most competencies used in CKV can be related to the ones in the CEFR-VL, although there are quite some differences in the actual content, skills and levels. The only subcompetencies used in CKV that seem to be missing in the CERF-VL are the subcompetencies to *compare*, to *contextualize* and to *connect*. To me, these competencies need further scrutiny for inclusion in the CEFR-VL. Interestingly, they all relate to the wider context of art in society and private life, and thus surpasses the level of learning what to do and how. They address the issue of understanding the arts at a deeper level: why is art important for me and for others? I think this question should be given more prominence in Visual Literacy and education in general.