

Collaborating in visual art research at European level: potentials and pitfalls

Contemporary discussions on the future of education take on an international character. One of the most prominent, and for some the most controversial, is the theory behind the PISA, the international comparative research on education launched by the end of last century by the OECD, the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development in Paris. As the PISA website states: “The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a triennial international survey which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students who are nearing the end of their compulsory education. PISA assesses how well they can apply what they learn in school to real-life situations.”¹ The comparisons were made by making use of tests, and the results are presented in a quantitative way, thus generating a fuzz on what countries are at the top, and what countries lag behind. An international rat race was started and at national level, discussions were started by politicians and others on why students in their own country were not as well educated as the students in a neighbouring country. In some countries reforms were introduced to support the subjects investigated by PISA. Thus the art subjects were seen as less important.

But why compare national education systems? The name of the authority responsible for this research, the OECD, reflects the first and main concern of this research: how to improve economic development. Education is seen – and correctly so – as one of the main tools of a society to improve its economic activities. And on what basis is the comparison made? In the very beginning the research concentrated on the skills and knowledge in the domain of mathematics, science and reading. Since its first survey, published in 2000, PISA has introduced collaborative problem solving, financial literacy and, in 2018, ‘global competence’. Here the notion of ‘competence’ pops up. In 2021 PISA will assess ‘creative thinking’.²

This more recent development in what PISA is assessing is closely connected to the discussion on what are called the ‘21st century skills’. Several organisations and research institutes have made lists of what they think are ‘21st century skills’. To give some examples: ‘critical thinking’, ‘collaboration’, ‘problem solving’, ‘citizenship’, ‘creativity’, ‘cultural awareness’ and ‘ICT skills’. These are all skills that are not covered by one school subject, but skills that should guide the revision of existing curricula. The focus on skills and the social context is supported by the notion of ‘competency’- here again.

At European level the discussion on ‘competencies’ started with the discussion on the comparability of fluency in foreign languages. When you, as an employee, wish to take on a job in another European country, your new employer will be interested to know how well you can communicate in the language spoken in his country. You can refer to your school diploma, its level, additional certificates and experiences while spending time abroad. But how can your new employer get an insight in your actual skills, not only in speaking, but also in listening, reading, and writing. And the minimum requirements in fluency in a foreign language as defined in your home country may greatly differ from what is expected in the country where it is the official language spoken. So in 1991 the Council of Europe started a complex programme to arrive at tools to compare language skills of people at different levels in a transparent and equal way. This resulted in the so-called Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.³ Here too, the notion of ‘competencies’ plays an important role. Parallel to this we find a project on improving the comparability of levels in vocational education in the European domain, started by the European Centre for the Development of Educational Training (Cedefop).⁴ As part of this project research was done on the notion of ‘competency’ in the domain vocational learning.⁵ Finally, in 2013 the Council of Europe initiated a new project: *Competences for Democratic Culture and Intercultural Dialogue*. Here too we find the notion of competencies, also outside the context of education.⁶

1 <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/>

2 <https://www.devex.com/news/pisa-founder-andreas-schleicher-on-the-future-of-the-education-ranking-94561>

3 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>

4 European Commission (2008), *The European Qualifications Framework for Life-long Learning*, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.

5 Weinert, F.E. (1999), *Concepts of competence. Theoretical and conceptual foundations*. Neufchatel: DeSeCo

6 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/about-the-project-competences-for-democratic-culture-and-intercultural-dialogue>

So what about the arts? Is the concept of 'competency' helpful to describe what students must learn in education? Has the concept, or the ideas behind it, already been implemented in curricula? Is it possible and recommendable to arrive at a common European frameworks of reference for the arts?

In 2014 the European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL), a non-formal group of researchers in the domain of art education from eight European countries, took up the challenge.⁷ They started a research project, co-funded by the Comenius grant programme of the European Union, to arrive at a first prototype of a Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy, - the notion of 'visual literacy' is here used as an umbrella concept to cover all school subjects in the domain of visual learning or visual art education. As its name indicates, this project reflects the same ambition as what has been done for the (European) languages in the development of their Frameworks. Regretfully the researchers of ENViL had much less time and money, and political support than their colleagues in language education, so the result is not only a prototype, but a first small step also.

Why a Common European Framework of Reference for the visual arts? Four reasons are given:

- exchange and understanding between subject communities;
- orientation for the development of national or regional curricula;
- a common point of reference
- to enter the contemporary educational discussion a national, European and international level.⁸ The Framework is nor prescriptive, it is an advise. It gives individual countries the opportunity to select what it thinks is most relevant for its own educational a national situation. It is also undogmatic: it is written in such a way that it does not favour a particular disciplinary theory or specialized teaching methodology.

To arrive at a framework that would be recognizable for all current practices, as well as be helpful to all situations, it was decided to look for what is common in current European curricula. To find this commonality it was decided to collect information from as many European curricula as possible, from both primary and secondary education. In the end 37 curricula from 22 countries were analyzed by means of a questionnaire, completed by specialists in the domain of art education in these countries. In this research the use of the concept of 'competency' was taken as a central point of reference. A competency relates to the combined use of learnable knowledge, skills and attitudes and is demonstrated in a specific (professional) situations. It is described in terms of observable behavior, not in terms of input.⁹ The central elements in this definition are knowledge (as internalized information about facts and processes), skills (cognitive, psychomotor, affective, perceptual, social) and attitudes. This latter concept relates to intentional states of minds needed to act, like responsibility, willingness, and motivation. And, most importantly: the situation, as competencies can only be demonstrated in relevant situations. What makes a situation relevant depends on the purpose of the action demanded, but also on the domain of learning which the action takes place. For art education this is the domain of the image and imagination. Each situation is determined by issues like moment and place, the people or objects involved, the purpose of the action needed, the tools available (both practical as well as cultural), the type and style of communication and by other restrictions or demands, like safety rules, copyrights, ecology, economy, time available, etc. Competency thus becomes quite a complex concept that needs further scrutiny, both in theory as in its practical applicability.

After a thorough analysis of all questionnaires and intense discussion between the researchers in the project, it was finally decided to bring down the amount of competencies found to sixteen. It was also apparent, that these competencies could not be seen irrespective of the more generic goals and competencies that play a role in education. In this way the first prototype was developed and visualized. In the center one finds 'visual competency', consisting of sixteen sub-competencies. These are presented as a kind of cloud, with no structure or internal relationships (figure 1).

⁷ Wagner, E. & Schönau, D. Eds. (2016), *Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy - Prototype*, Münster/ New York: Waxmann. For comments on the Framework see the Special Issue of the *International Journal for Education through Art* 15,1, 2019.

⁸ Wagner, E. (2016), *Introduction*, in E. Wagner & D. Schönau, *Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy –Prototype*, Münster/New York: Waxmann, p. 65.

⁹ Wagner E. & Zapp, K, (2016) A competency-oriented approach, in: E. Wagner. & D. Schönau, *Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy –Prototype*, Münster/New York: Waxmann, pp.98-101

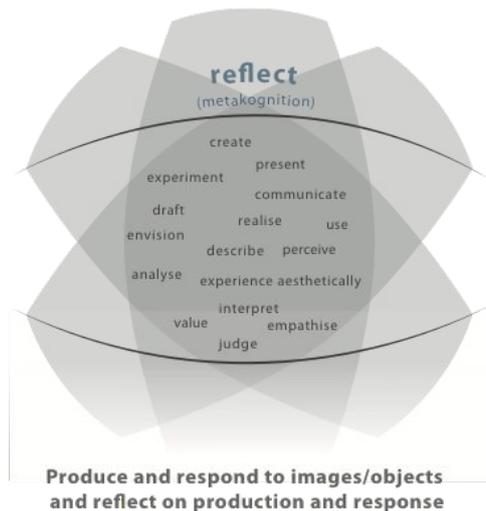


Figure 1: The sub-competencies in the CEFR-VL model (Wagner & Schönau, 2016, p.68)).

Having completed the prototype it will become clear that this is not the end of our research.

First of all the concept of 'competency' needs a more precise elaboration, as for instance the notion of 'skills' is multilevel in character. The notion of 'attitudes' is a kind of leftover category of issues that elude reduction to knowledge or skill. But more importantly: is it possible to find some structure in the sixteen sub-competencies? In the past year ENViL has worked on the specification of the model. In Figure 2 news more generic competencies have been defined, one group related to the process of making images, the other one to responding to images.

Generate ideas	Research visually	Make	Present	Evaluate
Analyse	Analyse	Create	Describe	Analyse
Describe	Draft	Communicate	Judge	Describe
Emphatise	Experiment	Use	Present	Judge
Envision	Interpret	Realise	Realise	Value
Experience aesthetically	Use		Value	
Interpret				
Perceive				

Figure 2: The five generic competencies for 'producing' in visual literacy

The experience of ENViL to arrive at a common European framework of reference for the domain of visual learning has generated more generic insights but also questions, that are relevant for all art subjects in school.

First of all, the experience of ENViL has demonstrated the power of working on a common project on a transnational base. Looking for what is common has made it possible to discuss what is different in a more solid way. Secondly, by concentrating on competencies the educators and researchers in the domain of visual learning are better able to take part in educational discussions at a more abstract level that relates to all school subjects, and to the future of education in general. It also turned out, that in the multi-lingual research done by ENViL, the meaning of 'equal' concepts used in different languages is not as equal as was hoped for. Just by confronting these differences the own uniqueness

and meaning of concepts within a language become more apparent, thus helping to reduce misunderstanding in international communication, and opening the views to other interpretations. And doing international research is stimulating, as it broadens one's view on what the subject is all about in other countries and cultural contexts.

But next to the advantages we also have to take into account some potential risks.

ENViL has based its analysis on actual curricula. We can consider these curricula as the filtered down view on the school subject at national level. What is common in these curricula does not automatically add up to a kind of core curriculum. It only shows what in most curricula is presented as typical and essential for the related school subjects. This core, however, should not be seen as prescriptive, but as a point of reference. And although some concepts seem to be used in different countries in a comparable way, we have to be alert, that what looks the same can actually refer to different issues. The concept of 'visual literacy' itself turned out to be less neutral than it was intended when it was introduced by ENViL to indicate the domain in education on which this network is concentrating. Also the sixteen sub-competencies are not equal in weight or breadth.

At process level the ENViL project raises questions with regard to the other art domains in education. Is the notion of competency helpful and relevant for other school subjects in the artistic domain? Is it really possible to arrive at common European grounds, where art and visual culture (and all arts) are so closely connected to national traditions, personal interpretations, varieties in types of 'artistic culture', different views on 'art', and the differences between the languages used to communicate about what is happening while learning in the artistic domain? How about the future of separate school subjects, when the notions of such generic notions as 'key competencies' and '21st century skills' indicate the future of educational development? And what about common research projects in the arts in the European area? It is hoped for that the example set by ENViL will generate a comparable interest in other art school subjects. This might even result in a joint action towards the European Union to generate a much more profound view on the role of arts in society, being this for personal well-being, citizenship or economic success. The arts can and should offer much more than a kind of intellectual entertainment.