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Visual Competency and the Structure of 'Making' in Art Education

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Abstract

In 2016 the European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL) published the prototype of a Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy (Wagner & Schönau, 2016). This prototype is based on the analysis of 37 European curricula in the domain of visual learning. The leading concept used in this analysis is the concept of 'competency'. The prototype presents sixteen sub-competencies, covering the complete domain of learning in both the productive subdomain ('making'), as well as the receptive subdomain ('responding'). In this presentation the concept of 'competency' is given further scrutiny. Also, the sixteen sub-competencies are reviewed and presented in a more generic and coherent format for use of these competencies in the subdomain of 'making'. (694)

Visual Competency and the Structure of 'Making' in Art Education

The notion of 'competency' is a hot issue in educational debates these days. Its origins are manifold: the need for lifelong learning that demands for skills that surpass what students learn at school and addresses skills to organize one's own learning processes; educational psychology, that underscores the need for learning within relevant contexts; the need to compare professionals in an international context and the insight that 'intelligence' is not enough in contemporary society. Criticisms about competencies are also manifold: competencies serve an economic agenda of transnational organisations like the European Union, the United Nations and, most importantly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; they are too vague to be useful; they introduce standards; they are too complicated to assess and finally too complex for schools and teachers to organize their learning processes. But are these criticisms to the point and is the concept really supporting the goals of education in a better and more effective way?

First, let's look at the definition of competency. In the research done by the European network for Visual Literacy (ENViL) the following definition is used: "The combined use of learnable knowledge, skills and attitudes in specific (professional) situations that are relevant for the domain." (Wagner & Schönau, 2016, p. 98). This definition shows that 'competency' is a concept, that includes a series of other sub- concepts that are normally taken for granted. But in order to make the definition more practical and insightful these sub-concepts should be well-defined. Knowledge, to start with, can be subdivided into factual knowledge, conceptual knowledge, procedural knowledge and metacognitive knowledge (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Knowledge is more than remembering facts. This becomes more clear when we look at the notion of 'skills'. The actual processing of knowledge (generating, remembering, applying) refers to so-called cognitive skills. These have found their way in so-called taxonomies, like the one of Benjamin Bloom in the early sixties (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Based on Bloom other taxonomies have been generated related to other types of skills, like psycho-motor skills and affective skills (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964; Simpson, 1966).

But within the educational and economic agenda these taxonomies have received far less attention. It is interesting to observe that all taxonomies relate to 'skills', being these cognitive, affective or psychomotor. But what about perceptual skills, social skills and all those skills that have found their way into models of '21 first century skills', like creativity, critical thinking, ICT-skills and the like? So, the concept of 'skills' is multi-headed as well.

The concept of 'attitudes' is even more slippery. It most often relates to issues of will and motivation (Krathwohl et al., 1964; Weinert, 2001). But an attitude relates to more than willingness or motivation, for instance to aspects like one's personal views on issues or to ways of (non-)behaving in a social context. When looked at more critically, it seems 'attitude' refers to aspects of a person that cannot be described in, or even covered by, terms of knowledge and skills alone, nor to their combination. It actually introduces characteristics of the person that can better be understood in terms of personality traits and learned views on social behavior. The latter views can be described in terms of knowledge and skills and would therefore not require an extra concept, but personality characteristics cannot. However, they do play an important role both in learning and in professional life, and maybe even more in the domain of visual and artistic learning. Such concepts as intelligence, talent, extraversion, risk-taking and open-mindedness cannot be reduced to elements of knowledge and skills. It therefore makes sense to replace the concept of 'attitude' in the general definition of competency by 'personality characteristic'. (695)

Finally, an important aspect in the model – and in the concept of competency - is the notion of 'situation'. A 'situation' generates when a given context is being interpreted by a person and demands for action in a responsive way that fits this interpretation. A situation can relate to the personal domain, the occupational domain, the public domain, but also to the educational domain. In this latter case a situation can be presented as a task that relates to an issue that is relevant for the student as a learner. When we take this first analysis as a starting point it will be clear that it might be helpful for art education to describe the notion of 'competency' in terms that are typical and relevant for this domain of learning. In an EU co-sponsored research project, ENViL had just tried to do this: to arrive at a model that describes the content of this domain in terms of competencies. This domain has to be understood in its broadest sense: competency in making and understanding man-made imagery, being these two- or three-dimensional or moving images, everyday images, applied art, film, fine art, architecture, multimedia, and even human-related visual imagination, perception and visual phenomena. The model developed by ENViL and presented as a prototype, is based on the analysis of 37 curricula from 22 different European countries (including Turkey) in which the use of the concept of 'competency' has been the guiding principle. Figures 1 and 2 give a visual summary of what this prototype looks like.

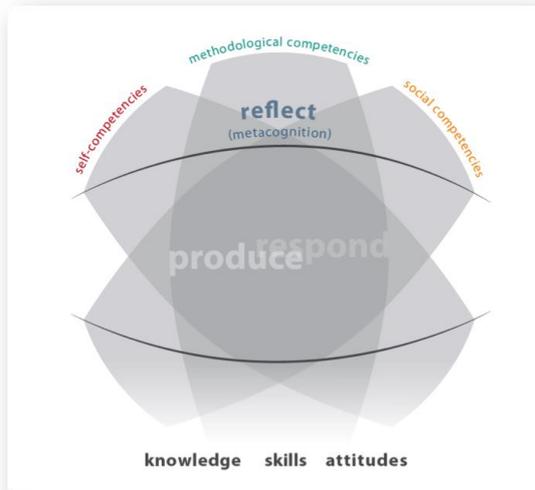


Figure 1 The ENViL competency model: basic dimensions

In Figure 1 visual competency is presented by two sub-domains: ‘produce’ and ‘respond’, representing the main division with the domain: making visual objects and understanding visual objects made by others. Visual competency is embedded in more generic methodological, social and personal competencies that always play a role but are not typical or unique for the domain of visual learning. The issue of ‘reflection’ is presented as a competency that is relevant and essential for both the productive and the receptive domain. (696)

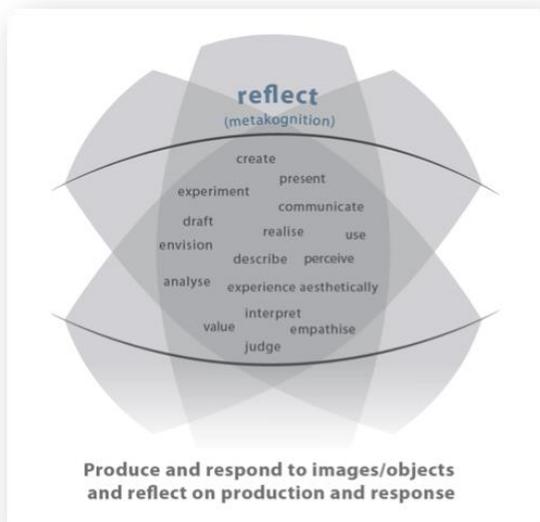


Figure 2 The ENViL competency model: differentiation of sub-competencies.

In Figure 2 sixteen co-called sub-competencies are presented: analyse, communicate, create, describe, draft, empathise, envision, experience aesthetically, experiment, interpret, judge, perceive, present, realise, use and value. The sub-competencies turned out to be the most often mentioned in the curricula as researched. Some are typical for production, other for understanding visual images, but most competencies can be applied in both subdomains. But as can be seen, they are presented

as a kind of 'cloud' of concepts, with no internal structure, order or hierarchy. At this point the research project had to stop, as there was no time or money left to make this prototype more practical for discussions on the content and curricula of the domain of visual learning.

In the past year a working group of ENViL has investigated the possibility to find some structure in this cloud, thus offering a more practical version for use in classrooms and curriculum development. First, it was decided that the sub-competencies should be reformulated in terms of 'ability' (or competency, for that matter), not just verbs. Secondly, they should be formulated in terms that are relevant and typical for learning in the visual domain. For the subdomain of 'making' (which is the theme of this congress), the working group has come forward with five more (697) generic competencies that not only fulfill the requirements as set, but also represent a logic that is recognizable to both learners and professionals in the domain. The five generic competencies in the subdomain of making are:

- the ability to perceive or envision a situation to generate visual ideas;
- the ability to do visual research;
- the ability to make visual images;
- the ability to present one's images;
- the ability to evaluate one's images and image-making processes.

When presented in their temporal order these five competencies can be described as 'generate', 'research', 'make', 'present', and evaluate'. The order is not prescriptive but reflects the most common way of working. Some stages can in some cases be skipped, other stages can be repeated, when for instance a work does not fit the expectations of the maker and the maker has to start the process anew.

As a result of this re-elaboration of the model and further investigation on the concepts used, the notion of productive visual competency can be reformulated in the following way: "The integrated use of knowledge, skills and personality characteristics that are relevant and effective in a given situation to arrive at an image that reflects the requirements of the situation." (698)

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