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Metamorphosis of visual literacy: From 'reading images' to a critical visual education

ABSTRACT

In this review some ideas about the Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy (CEFR-VL) are critically discussed from a South American perspective. First of all it is observed that the relationship to the visible world should also include nature and ecological issues. As to the concept of 'visual literacy', its linguistic and economic overtones are criticized from the point of view of visual education, as well as for its sociological implications. Finally the notion of competency and sub-competencies are discussed. The origin of 'competency' in an economic and technocratic model of curriculum runs the risk that in visual education the non-measurable might get lost. The CEFR-VL also runs the risk of becoming a rigid, prescriptive format, thus leaving little space for other views. It is hoped for that the professionals in the domain will transform the CEFR-VL into a valuable tool capable of offering multiple ways of seeing. Thus the concept of 'visual literacy' will give space to the notion of 'visual education'. This would be a most welcome metamorphosis of the domain.

KEYWORDS
visual competency
visual literacy
curriculum reform
educational goals
social relevance
Latin America

GENERAL COMMENTS

The prototype of the Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy (CEFR-VL) offers a valuable contribution for curriculum development in art, design and art education (Wagner and Schönau 2016). The teamwork, carried out by representatives from six European countries, and covering the curricula of 22 European countries, constitutes an important accomplishment in itself. Bringing together diverse cultural backgrounds into one framework also enriches the value of this proposal. This added value, related to the translation of concepts and experiences in three languages, can be seen, for example, in the way that the concept of visual literacy is approached:

> in *Visual Literacy*, sensory perception is coupled with reasoning, sensation with insight, imagination with joined-up thinking. *Visual Literacy* is therefore not simply the visual ability to read, but the set of abilities resulting from a 'visual education'. It should also extend to the notion of what is indicated in German by the word 'Bildung' (English: 'education', French: 'éducation'). Then 'visuelle Bildung' ('visual education', 'éducation visuelle') integrates competencies of *Visual Literacy* in a wider context of permanent self-education of an attitude that is open for persons, images, and objects in direct relationship to cognition, intuition, and imagination as well. Visuelle Bildung cultivates a contemplative attitude of visual experience and creation that does not only educate competencies as envisioned in *Visual Literacy*, but educates the character of a person as well.
>
> (Buschkühle 2016: 104, original emphasis)

Bearing in mind that visual literacy was introduced by ENViL to cover a wide range of subjects in the visual domain – better known as, for example, 'artistic education' in Austria, 'design' in Switzerland or 'art' in many German states – it is not surprising that, under the umbrella of visual literacy, a significant number of European representatives were able to work around a common aim. However, it is also possible that linguistic, conceptual, ideological and disciplinary differences between the members that worked on the development of the CEFR-VL not only have enriched the proposal but also complicated the process of negotiation and editing of the framework, even to such an extent that it can hinder reader's comprehension, an issue that I will consider further.

Some aspects that struck me positively and that I would like to highlight are the following. I fully agree with the statement, early in the document, 'that the framework of reference is undogmatic: [...] it does not favour a particular disciplinary theory or specialised teaching methodology' (Wagner and Schönau 2016: 64), and '[i]ts aim is to advise, not standardise' (Wagner and Schönau 2016: 65). Second, as visual literacy covers all topics and subjects in the visual domain, specifying the scope of 'the visual' early in the publication is not only a fundamental requirement but also very helpful to the reader. I fully agree with the broad meaning given to 'images' in the framework, as referring to 'everyday images and objects', 'works/objects of applied art', 'works/objects of art' and finally 'perception of phenomena in the visible world and visual imagination/internal images' (Wagner and Schönau 2016: 70). I also fully share the proposed approach by prioritizing a view from images and objects of everyday life in relationship to manifestations such us design, architecture, environmental design, film, fashion, photography, painting, installation, media, sculpture and the visible world in all its forms.

With respect to the last category (perception of phenomena in the visible world) and keeping in mind the present environmental crisis and the urgent challenges that we are facing (e.g. the historic climate agreement approved by 196 countries in Paris in 2015), I would suggest to make explicit reference to 'nature', considering the following sub-dimensions: human body, natural environment and the cosmic universe. It seems to me that the ideas as expressed in 'Arts education and education for sustainable development' (Wagner 2014) should be integrated to a larger extent in the framework. In

this sense, it is surprising that this dimension has not been included among the key educational goals of civic engagement, social cohesion, personal unfolding and employability.

To summarize, what I actually value in the sequence of 'everyday images and objects, applied art', and 'the phenomena in the visible world as well as visual imagination' is the idea of breaking the narrow link between visual literacy and art appreciation, or, in other words, the break with a notion of art education that is art-centred, and often obsessed with masterpieces and its institutional circuits (museums, galleries, others), and the life of the great artists. This 'art-centredness' in many art education programmes also tends to neglect the aesthetic dimension in everyday life.

Having highlighted some strengths of the concept of visual literacy I will now refer to aspects that, in my opinion, can hinder the reader's comprehension.

First, I would like to make a comment on the three figures that visually synthesize the main components and levels of the structural mode.

[FIGURE 1]

Paradoxically, these three visual images are not very helpful in illustrating the concept of visual literacy as presented in the framework. Of course, no image is capable of synthesizing the richness and complexity of visual literacy as developed by ENViL. In my opinion, the quality of image designs is not at the required level of excellence in a document whose main theme is visual literacy, and in a proposal that will circulate in the European community. In short, the figure's theoretical and visual content tends to be unclear, very questionable and the product of an outdated design. It reminds me of school texts of the 1960s. It is better to have no visual images instead of having ones that do not represent the 'visual literacy – structural model' consistently. To be more specific, what does not seem to be working is either the visual ambiguity and/or dogmatism in the selection and space disposition of certain contents in these images. For example, after attempting to decode Figure 1, I can recognize the schematic representation of an eye – or visual field – that seems to rotate in 360 degrees and overlap at different latitudes, generating various forms and interactions focused horizontally by two lines defining the area of visual literacy's process. At the bottom of the image, situations of 'diverse nature' related to visual literacy can be shown, where the overlap of the text in various planes and intensities of light and shadow makes the reading of the image difficult. I would prefer to formulate this idea as 'contexts/situations in which visual literacy is involved'.

I share the view that visual literacy may contribute to key educational goals such as civic engagement, social cohesion, personal unfolding and employability; however, why ignore visual literacy regarding, for example, sustainable development (Paris, 2015), civic coexistence, intercultural environments and gender? I understand that it is not possible to include all key educational goals in Figure 1; nevertheless, to mention only some goals and omit others key educational aims also implies a bias.

[FIGURE 2]

With respect to Figure 2 I have two main concerns: one related to the basic dimensions 'produce' and 'respond' and the other regarding 'reflect' as 'metacognition'. I can understand that 'produce' and 'respond' are considered key components of the structural model, which can be broken down into sixteen sub-competencies. However, I believe that these words fail to synthesize the richness of the concept of visual literacy developed by ENViL. Moreover, they project or represent a rather limited vision of the framework that I cannot avoid but link with a technocratic and behaviourist model that, in my opinion, certainly diminishes the value of the proposal. Without the intention to compare, but to illustrate the point, I assume that the programme called Discipline-Based Art Education

(DBAE) proposes an interesting balance between diverse cognitive learning domains, '[p]roduction, art history, art criticism, and aesthetics', which safeguard, at least theoretically, the vision projected in the model developed by ENViL.

To project a more balanced visual representation in Figure 2, I would suggest reconsidering the relevance and visual position of 'reflect' as 'metacognition', that, although it is declared a 'key part of visual competency' (Wagner and Schönau 2016: 82), is not developed in the English text of this publication (part A). I would also recommend an early introduction of that notion into the text, and the design of a more consistent visual image capable of illustrating the close relationship between 'produce', 'reflect' and 'respond'.

[FIGURE 3]

In terms of Figure 3, it seems to me that the idea of representing the differentiation of sub-competencies (grouped into clusters based on proximity to one another in terms of content) is inappropriate and somewhat dogmatic. It not only projects a mistaken view of the interaction that may exist between the various domains and modes of cognition, but also reproduces a wrong perception of the importance to be attributed to the individual sub-competencies. The great variety of processes and interactions in which the human mind is able to operate, through various ways of knowing and understanding, along with the multiple paths used by artists, show, for example, that 'create' and 'experiment' can simultaneously imply modes of 'aesthetic experience' and 'interpretation'. What is explained in written form '[…] in practice the sub-competencies are not acquired individually or in isolation, but in tasks […] that always address several sub-competencies' (Wagner and Schönau 2016: 69) is denied in the visual representation presented in Figure 3. It is also questionable in Figure 3 how the sub-competences are grouped into two main categories. In the upper part, all those sub-competencies that involve action, doing, producing ('create', 'present', 'experiment', 'communicate', other) below those that are associated with reflection, valuation, introspection ('perceive', 'analyse', 'experience aesthetically', etc.). If we think visually, and consider the meaning of the notions 'up' and 'down' in, for example, fields such as advertising, marketing and political and religious hierarchies of power, we must recognize that Figure 3 assigns visually more importance to the subcompetences located up than below. In other words, this image reproduces the historical trend of art education (see for example Macdonald 1970; Wilson and Hoffa 1985; Errázuriz 1993) focused mainly on producing, creating and experimenting, where perceiving, analysing and the aesthetic experience have been rather a marginal purpose. Taking this historical trend into account, and as a way of countering it, I firmly believe that the most important aims both for visual literacy and for art education should be precisely those located at the bottom of Figure 3, and consequently, they should be relocated in a more relevant visual position. In short, it draws my attention that in a framework of reference for visual literacy sub-competencies such as perceiving, analysing, interpreting, evaluating and judging have been placed very low in the spatial hierarchy. It would be enriching and interesting for the teamwork of representatives from European countries to have a 'visual discussion' with experts in visual communication for Figures 1–3 of the CEFR-VL.

With respect to the comprehension of the document (part A of the publication), the present framework's presentation makes it difficult, from my point of view, to understand. The sequence of chapters does not favour the assimilation of the framework. After a brief introduction on the origins of the project, its background, the content of the CEFR-VL, its intention and the approach adopted, the document first focuses on the explanation of the sub-competencies without considering before in some depth the following key question: why should 'visual literacy' be promoted in national and regional European curricula and, possibly, in the curricula of other countries and continents?

It is important – but not enough – to include in the first page of the document a footnote on 'visual literacy' as referring to all subjects in the visual domain, while on the website of ENViL 'visual literacy' has a different meaning and definition: 'visual literacy' means the capacity to reflect, understand and create visual messages. These competences gain more and more importance in our world through, for instance, mass media, heterogeneous backgrounds of people, glocal identities, intercultural dialogue, the 'iconic turn' in the sciences.

Visual literacy is a premise for the critical and self-determined cultural participation of the individual, and can thus be understood as a decisive requirement for participation. At school, the subject art education delivers the competences that are needed in all subjects. From this perspective, it seems to me that the valuable contributions of Folkert Haanstra of 'The concept of visual literacy' (2016) and of Carl-Peter Buschkühle about 'How visual literacy contributes to general education' (2016) should be relocated immediately after the introduction of the CEFR-VL. It would be much more appropriate to clarify such a 'fundamental notion' (Mitchell 2008) at the start of the publication. Hence, I would suggest elaborating a more robust first chapter including a general introduction regarding the concepts of 'visual literacy' and 'image', and the contribution of visual literacy to general education. Then the structural model can be presented.

Considering the concept of 'visual literacy' itself, we can question why the concept of 'visual education' or 'visual studies' is not used instead. Of course the answer to this question not only has semantic implications, as Elkins, referring to visual literacy, has pointed out: 'these two words compress the common and unavoidable contradiction that we "read" images' (2008: 1).

THE CONCEPT OF VISUAL LITERACY IN LATIN AMERICA (CHILE)

In many Latin American countries, the word 'literacy' is associated with the educational processes carried out in the continent since 1950 related to the right to education included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. In fact, UNESCO, referring to the concept of literacy, its evolution and perspectives, has pointed out that to understand this concept, it is essential to recognize that 'illiteracy' is associated with poverty conditions and denial of access to quality education for the entire population:

> The evolution of the concept of literacy and its negative expression, illiteracy, is associated with the transformations of society and the growing demands that it presents to people to enter and remain in the written culture. The relativity and vagueness with which the term has been used is also explained by the difficulty of directly checking the skills with which people count and to establish the level of reading, writing and numerical calculus that will allow them to be considered Literate.
>
> (OREALC and UNESCO 2013: 16)

Therefore, if we admit that the concept of literacy is linked, in one way or another, to the negative expression of 'illiteracy', we must recognize that a wrong association is inevitably established – at least from a semantic perspective – with respect to those who are supposedly unable to read or decode images because they are considered visually 'illiterate'. We should also bear in mind that linguistic 'illiteracy' (oral/written) often has a negative connotation, that is, not knowing how to read and write implies a low socio-economic condition and cultural marginality, at least in Latin America and probably also in other continents. Being illiterate usually means living in poverty and belonging to the most deprived sectors of society. Therefore, the educational enterprise to stimulate literacy processes has also given rise to paternalistic attitudes towards people considered 'illiterate', who tend to be perceived in a passive and ignorant role. Thus, from this

perspective, it is not surprising to find associations of the concept of literacy in Latin America with such attitudes, a trend that perhaps is not so evident in Europe.

In summary, the idea of 'visual literacy' suggests a passive and submissive connotation on the part of the 'illiterate'. Hence, it could hardly be justified or validated today in a visual educational programme for children and adolescents, at least not in Latin America. Consequently, with respect to the question of whether the approach to the domain of visual literacy as presented in the CEFR-VL might be a desirable universal approach in education, my answer is no. Although we are living in a 'global village', there are many different realities and cultural local and ethnic contexts, which make it very difficult – not to say almost impossible – to promote a 'universal approach in education'. To support this position, I quote extensively the following point of view that I exposed at a UNESCO *Regional Conference* (2001) in relation to the situation of art education in Latin America:

> We must admit that unless we can propose a more interesting kind of art education it will be difficult to aspire to greater recognition.
>
> If we look at the educational landscape from another angle, it would seem that the ethnic diversity and historic inequalities of Latin America – social and economic, amongst others – are becoming increasingly obvious as globalization progresses. On one side, there are the indigenous peoples, the rural world and the small towns with their own rituals, customs and ways of life; and on the other, the large cities with their contradictions, such as citizens who are categorized first, second, third or lowest class according to the opportunities that they have to exercise basic rights to work, health, accommodation, education, etc. How can we not add to this landscape of contrasts the wonderful differences in the geography of each country that offer a great variety of aesthetic experiences and much potential for creation, but also a number of problems due to natural disasters and lack of foresight? These ethnic, social, cultural, geographical and political differences also penetrate arts education in Latin America, even when its methods and results in school do not reflect the above-mentioned diversity and contrasts to any significant extent.
>
> All the inhabitants of this continent – with all its wealth and poverty – should have access, or rather the right, to arts education. It is against this background of strengths and weaknesses that we must create greater equality of opportunity so that men and women have access to a better quality arts education that responds more appropriately to their cultural differences, identities and traditions.
>
> (Errázuriz 2003: 17–18)

If visual literacy, 'paradoxical and old-fashioned as it is' (Elkins 2008: 3), were a more open and inclusive term so that it could incorporate the notion of 'visual culture' explicitly, then it would contribute towards promoting a more critical and reflective 'visual education'. In this sense, it is surprising that the idea of 'visual culture' is barely mentioned throughout the CEFR-VL. In fact, the implementation of visual education should, in my opinion, not only be characterized by their interactive dynamism and shared learning, but especially by the development of a reflective and critical attitude towards a wide range of visual cultures. Bearing in mind Paulo Freire's critical method of literacy, children and adolescents must learn to develop a critical conscience (Chetty 2015). From this perspective, visual education could make a significant contribution towards promoting such awareness since a true democracy requires the exercise of a critical consciousness. In other words, Freire never accepted that educational practice should be confined to reading the word, reading the text, but should include reading the context, reading the world with critical literacy.

COMPETENCY AS AN EDUCATIONAL CONCEPT

It is not surprising that the power of competency models in education is perceived today, in many European, Latin American1 and other countries, as a tsunami, so much so that it would be naive to try to resist this trend in curriculum planning. However, to prevent and, if possible, avoid the risk of being overtaken by this tsunami, in my view it is necessary to keep a critical distance, a reflexive attitude and be more conscious of its potential risks. During the last decades, a growing and sustained international tendency has emerged to use 'the term competence (and its near relatives such as competency, skills, capabilities, learning outcomes, etc.) in connection with economic and political pressures towards education' (Pikkarainen 2014).

This perception of the term competency is complemented by Atli Harðarson in 'How to resist the temptation of the technocratic model':

> A technocratic model of curriculum design that has been highly influential since the middle of last century assumes that the aims of education can be, and should be: 1. Causally brought about by administering educational experiences; 2. Specified as objectives that can be attained, reached or completed; 3. Changes in students that are described in advance.
>
> (2016: 59)

After considering the educational aims based on this model, Harðarson concludes that the technocratic views of curriculum design that focus on causation, closed aims (or objectives) and principles of design (top-down) 'leave little room for spontaneity and creative responses to unforeseen questions and opportunities' (2016: 70).

Keeping the gap between the competency-based curriculum models criticized by Pikkarainen and Harðarson, and the prototype of the CEFR-VL, we must recognize that CEFR-VL can yield benefits and opportunities. For example, students can choose from a wide range of learning experiences at diverse levels and contexts, have to develop practical or vocational skills and are expected to master specific competencies according to learning objectives (see Pace 2013).

Also, from an educational policy perspective, the competency model as proposed in the CEFR-VL could provide, among other benefits, a more systematic cognitive framework for teaching art and design, areas that have often received a low academic reputation as they are mainly associated with manual work, the expression of feeling, emotion, a way of play or other subjective dimensions of human experience.

Although the authors of the CEFR-VL explicitly declare that they do 'not favour a particular disciplinary theory or specialised teaching methodology' (Wagner and Schönau 2016: 64), and '[i]ts aim is to advise, not standardise' (2016: 65), inevitably the structural model imposes a way of dealing with the visual domain by means of competencies in subjects that are responsible for 'visual literacy' (art education, design), which, by their very nature, are not equivalent, for instance, to biology, physics or history. In other words, there is a systematic approach that might be very influential in everyday teaching and learning school practice, particularly in terms of the assessment of competency levels. To illustrate this point, I quote Eisner, who identifies a particular important set of outcomes for arts education, first-tier aims that may also be relevant in the context of visual literacy:

> This one pertains to dispositions that are difficult to assess, let alone measure but they are dispositions that appear to be cultivated through programs that engage students in the process of artistic creation. I speak of dispositional outcomes such us the following: a willingness to imagine possibilities that are not know, but which might become. A desire to explore ambiguity, to be willing to forestall premature closure in pursuing resolutions, and the ability to recognize and accept the multiple perspectives and resolutions that work in the arts celebrate.

(1998: 99)

Similarly, the desire to explore the uncertain and changing visual world that we are living in, celebrating the richness of intercultural contexts, diverse ethnic backgrounds, promoting multiple perspectives and ways of seeing, should not be regulated by a CEFR-VL based on the structural model and sub-competences, which could eventually run the risk of becoming a rigid curricular structure that should be applied as provided by curriculum planners and local educational authorities.

CONCLUSION

The concept of metamorphosis that was introduced at the beginning of this reflection, which indicates the need to replace the name 'visual literacy' (reading images) by 'visual education', now extends to the idea of promoting a 'metamorphosis of the CEFR-VL' that ensures the critical appropriation of educational communities, of teachers and students, according to their own needs and cultural realities. From my point of view, the greatest success that CEFR-VL could aspire to is being transformed by teachers and students into a valuable tool capable of offering multiple ways of seeing. It may increase and shake the ability to observe, to make something more lucid, more incisive and the ability to perceive beyond appearances, to encourage a more sensitive look, a look that pays attention to the great challenges of our contemporary society and cultivates the intrinsic value of aesthetic experience in everyday life, in the arts and outside of the arts.

As mentioned above, the prototype of the CEFR-VL offers a valuable contribution for curriculum development in art, design and art education, and also represents some risks that should be taken into consideration. Beyond the risks and difficulties mentioned, it would be interesting and enriching to build a network to carry out a similar research process in Latin American countries.

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