

CULTURAL EXPRESSION: 'ARTISTIC' OR 'SOCIAL' COMPETENCE? IMAGE CREATIVITY IN YOUNG ADULTS ASPIRING TO BECOME PRIMARY LEVEL TEACHERS IN ITALIAN-SPEAKING SWITZERLAND

Mario Bottinelli Montandon

Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italiana

Dipartimento formazione e apprendimento

mario.bottinelli@supsi.ch

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VISUAL EXPRESSION

Two different cohorts of young adults, as a function of their access to Teacher training program for pre-primary and primary teachers in the Canton of Ticino (CH), attended in 2021 and 2022 a weeklong art workshop at the Department of Education and Learning of SUPSI (DFA). Framed within an annual training course, these intensive ateliers involved graphic, pictorial and plastic artistic research focusing on the theme 'Art and War', mobilizing the potential of the artwork to arouse not only emotional reactions, but also generative on a cognitive level, in order to develop reflective-critical thinking and creative thinking. Technical-expressive and representational competences have

been placed in the foreground, activating strategies of figurative-abstract expression on the two-dimensional surface or in three dimensions. The article approach can be traced to the perspective of the case study and it is based on the resources (knowledge, skills and attitudes) referred to in Key competence 8 for lifelong learning, *Cultural awareness and expression competence* (European Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018). The project is intended to verify the status of both the image and visual culture in the transition between upper secondary and university of teacher education for the school system of the Italian-speaking Canton of Switzerland.

INTRODUCTION

Analysis of Cultural awareness and expression competence

The European Council's 8th key competence for lifelong learning, *Cultural awareness and expression competence* (Official Journal of the European Union, C 189/11, 2018) defines the resources required (knowledge, skills and attitudes) as follows: "knowledge of local, national, regional, European and global cultures and expressions, including their languages, heritage and traditions, and cultural products, and an understanding of how these expressions can influence each other as well as the ideas of the individual" (*ibidem*). The "understanding" competence particularly involves "the different ways of communicating ideas between creator, participant and audience" within various traditional artistic languages as well as "hybrid forms". The question of identity is also considered, and specifically the coexistence of heritage "within a world of cultural diversity", insofar as "arts and other cultural forms can be a way to both view and shape the world" (*ibidem*).

This statement partly justifies the choice made by the author in addressing Picasso's *Guernica* as the main vehicle of meaning making in the studio art lesson. *Guernica* thus is offered as a prototype of artistic expression strongly embedded in collective events of historical and aesthetic significance, emerging as an archetype of the modern representation of war. The training experience presented here thus follows Bromley's (1990) definition of the case study – "systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest" (p. 302) – where the war event constitutes the referential phenomenon for the iconic representation task proposed to the art workshop participants. Another reason for the choice of *Guernica* is to be found in the typology of this inquiry, a teaching case study that, because of its didactic-applicative character, involves student-centered activities based on visual artifacts already investigated in the domain of the discipline and capable of conveying reflections and

implementation of formatively significant theoretical and practical elements (Davis & Wilcock, 2003).

With regard to the second context of resource activation, i.e. 'skills', it should be emphasized that, according to European Council's 8th key competence, they "include the ability to express and interpret figurative and abstract ideas, experiences and emotions", being capable of "empathy" in a range of "arts and other cultural forms" (C 189/11, 2018). Lastly, with reference to the dispositional aspects of the participants in the art workshop, it should be stressed the "positive attitude" of *Cultural awareness and expression competence* as a "curiosity about the world, an openness to imagine new possibilities, and a willingness to participate in cultural experiences" (C 189/12, 2019).

In addition to being a good practice, the presented case study may also provide insights for a future arts-based research (Hudson & Hudson, 2007; McKay & Sappa, 2020) focused on exploring *non-cognitive resources* to cultural expression competence, as future teachers, in a population of young adults between upper secondary and university education. As a matter of fact, the purpose of the case study presented was not the problem of curricular integration of European Key competence 8 (Bracun Sova & Kemperl, 2012), but to observe the perceived self-efficacy of young art workshop participants. This emphasis is to be placed in relation to the well-known dispositional difficulties that have long been considered in the literature, both in semiotic-visual terms (Pizzo Russo, 1988, p. 101) and in terms of teachers' preparation for artistic and expressive languages (Certini, 2015; Pinto et al., 2009).

The method implemented was therefore to mobilize the *Cultural awareness and expression competence* resources in the students participating in the workshop, while testing a teaching hypothesis structured around three disciplinary and transversal processes:

1. Openness to social criticism art forms, in line with the critical approach of some contemporary art and visual culture;

2. Availability to expressive involvement from a perspective that is not only studio art-making 'techniques', with reference to the *Piano di studio della scuola dell'obbligo ticinese* (2015) and the concept of *Visual Competence* (Wagner & Schönau, 2016);
3. Overcoming, as future generalist teachers, the 'utilitarian' vision of artistic education in primary schools, by assuming an attitude of *researchers of meaning* through visual form, rather than 'suppliers' of creative activities inspired by the didactic formula of *Best Practices*.

Demographic portrait of participants

In the edition of 2021 as well as in that of 2022, the *Visual and Plastic Art Design* workshop has involved sixteen students ranged in age from 20 to 25 years old. The cohort of young adults was heterogeneous in terms of prior studies, coming from different post-compulsory study paths, but all had in common the fact that they had not obtained a high school or specialized diploma. For this reason, they were following the one-year curriculum called the *Complementary Professional Maturity Course* (Passerelle maturité professionnelle/spécialisée - Hautes écoles universitaires), a 'preliminary' course that prepares participants for the complementary exam in order to access teacher training at the pre-primary and primary school level (certification of the specialized high school diploma for pedagogical studies). Areas of training include languages, mathematics, science and the arts.

The *Visual and Plastic Art Design* art week took place at the Department of Education and Learning (DFA) of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI) and was designed to enable the class to acquire the artistic and cultural skills that, in the Swiss upper secondary school framework, are required at the end of a general culture school with a pedagogical focus (CDPE, 2018). However, this professional specialization is not provided in the Canton of Ticino. It is a field of study that proposes both theoretical-applicative ("principles of the figurative arts") and

expressive learning objectives (“creative skills in the field of the figurative arts”, CDPE, p. 11). The percentage of students who had previously done vocational training in the technical-artistic field is a quarter (4 students out of 16), while the majority came from health and social sectors, the commercial sector and other vocational courses.

Perceived students’ preparedness for the *artistic encounter* between previous training and professional self-projection

Twelve out of the sixteen students involved in the pictorial and plastic laboratory announced themselves to be poorly introduced to artistic and expressive languages, as well as to the history of art and visual culture in general. The four students trained in professional schools with an artistic vocation had, on the other hand, acquired pretty good technical-expressive skills, although little profiled in the cultural domain and in personal research through artistic practice.

Having to comply with the compensatory requirement of the block week, on the one hand, and aiming at a meta-reflective educational intention on the other –also in view of the term *awareness*, which qualifies the European competence– the artwork *Guernica* (1936) by Picasso was proposed as a starting point. This iconic reference in international Art education (Arnheim, 1962/2007) is a classic of modern art, a sort of ‘pre-text’ in the sense of a point of visual departure for the students’ personal research, according to the “vehicular” approach to the work of art proposed by Dallari (2005) and by Ciarcià & Dallari (2016). This approach partly moderates the theoretical drifts of a didactic treatment of figurative expression in the abstract and ‘reading only’ mode, rather than a hands-on studio approach (i.e. manipulative and authorial in the visual reinterpretation). The author of the article is aware, however, that even in the active setting of the art classroom the ‘intellectualistic’ imprint returns to appear –sometimes even in primary school– offering itself as a cultural supplement to creative-manual paths otherwise

considered not challenging enough from the cognitive profile or not supported by art history (Bae, 2014, p. 62; Bracun Sova & Kemperl, 2012; Rickenmann, 2018, p. 60).

CULTURAL EXPRESSION: AN 'ARTISTIC' AND 'SOCIAL' COMPETENCE

Arts and emotion in learning visual competence

The role of emotions in artistic experiences has long been the subject of numerous researches in psychology and aesthetics (D'Angelo, 2020; Freedberg & Gallese, 2014), where the concept of 'empathy' acquires a connotation influenced by the culture of reference and the iconographic subject represented, according to the assumptions of the "good form" theorized by Gestalt (Crescimanno, 2010). Inspired by a contemporary tradition of artistic and visual didactics as an inseparable interweaving of intellect and matter (Rosenberg, 2016; Schönau, 2017), of reflexivity and action (Buschkühle, 2012), the operational proposal of the *Visual and Plastic Art Design* workshop aims at emotionally and semantically deconstructing the Picassian reference to activate an aesthetic/poietical process of personal 're-presentation'. The idea is that, in the complexity of the present time, a good teaching design for competences in art is not so much a matter of technical application of the *Best Practice* identified as a goal, or as a guarantee of "quality" (Cremer & Sternfeld, 2015; Mörsch, 2015), as it is an opportunity for the subject undergoing training to face a problematic scenario of social, as well as aesthetic significance (Kraehe, Hood & Travis, 2015; Milbrandt, 2010), where the dimensions of enjoyment and expression are strongly influenced by the "epistemological tacit assumptions" of the teachers themselves (Zuccoli, 2020, p. 80).

The aim is to recognize the "immersive" and "subversive" potential (Cremer & Sternfeld, 2015) of expressive themes and materials, to the extent that visual thinking

and manual sensibility collaborate in an intentionality that is assertive because artistic: “as we grow, we learn different things; but as we grow artistically, we learn things differently” (Sullivan, 2014, p. 270). The attempt, therefore, is to increase the educational significance of creative-manual activity in the educational context, not by barricading oneself behind one’s own ‘disciplinary fence’ –while even leveraging it– but by actively working on the sensitivity to media and materials and on socially shareable interpretations in a representation: “Focusing on visual(ization) does not do away with art in education. Rather, it is a way to rethink traditional art skills, avant-garde works of art, and artistic habits of mind in the context of visually dominated cultures” (Krahe, 2019, p. 5). The scholarly reference is to the pedagogical-artistic and problematizing attitude that the North American school has long focused on in *Visual culture art education* (Carpenter II & Tavin, 2010; Tavin, 2016; Wilson & Marmé Thompson, 2007) and that the author of this article has also considered in the reflection on his own didactic approach to the initial training of art teachers in the lower secondary (Bottinelli Montandon & Canonica Manz, 2019).

Meaning and activation of the artistic laboratory

The laboratory was introduced by the iconographic contextualization of *Guernica* (Picasso, 1937), with the aim of extending the reading of the work to the theme of ‘Art and War’. Some image creation professionals were then presented and discussed –Banksy and war photojournalists– who, although without any historical or stylistic link with Picasso, have explicitly conveyed through their visual expression the theme of war and, in particular, the problem of the civilian populations who have suffered from it. One of the expected results of the *Visual and Plastic Art Design* workshop, as a matter of fact, was the possibility of activating awareness of a significant moment in history (the Spanish civil war), but also in art (Picasso’s figurative code as a stylistic signature of modernity), in order to be able to

'read them against the light', interpreting and representing in turn a 'visual thinking', also in a meta-disciplinary function (transversal competences and general education contexts of the *Piano di studio della scuola dell'obbligo ticinese*, DECS, DS, 2015).

This educational outcome corresponds to a need of the trainee involved in the *Visual and Plastic Art Design* workshop –young adult and citizen– in order to acquire specific resources to make sense of the above mentioned Key competence 8 for lifelong learning: "understanding, developing and *expressing one's own ideas* and sense of place or role in society in a variety of ways and contexts" (Official Journal of the European Union, C 189/11, italics added). Knowing some models from the historical and artistic context is, therefore, a resource to be 'invested' in order to broaden one's cultural references and to consider learning as a transversal process, rather than a sectorial one.

Analysis of the artwork, extension to the processes involved

As already mentioned, the proposed lesson on *Guernica* derives from Arnheim's perceptual method (1962/2007) and in particular from the analysis of the extended horizontal format and the four compositional blocks in succession.

Students are thus invited to read from right to left, both through the dynamic vectors of the configurations –especially in the two central blocks with the beam of light culminating in the horse's head– and through the attitudes of the characters.

The war-inspired scene frames the emotional tension between the burning house on the far right and the 'weeping bull/mother' group on the left: both vertical elements statically act as the wings of an imaginary triptych. The dynamic comment on "visual(ization)", which was evoked earlier in Krahe's words (2019), can also be useful for understanding the following passage from Arnheim, which, in the author's didactic approach, functioned as a 'key to exit' from *Guernica*:

The long panel determines an absence of compactness.

As the viewer's eye travels across the canvas, it inspects



Fig. 1 Mario Bottinelli Montandon, *Graphic reworking from Guernica by Pablo Picasso*, 2021, digital image.

a sequence of themes instead of encountering a single, highly integrated structure [...]. The world conceived for Guernica is, therefore, a world where very similar events occur everywhere *without a strong unitary organization* (1962/2007, p. 57, italics added).

Pictures of war leading to expression

The absence of “unitary organization” as an expressive and social meaning is the concept that was most insisted upon in the proposal of an image by Banksy (*Napalm girl*, 2004) and a photograph by Nick Ut, the photojournalist in Vietnam, which constitutes its iconic source (*Kim Phuc - Napalm girl*, June 8, 1972). Other war photographs were also presented, images of cities destroyed by bombing in which some figures stand out: two children playing with a bicycle (Raqqqa, 2019) and a solitary painter, Theodor Rosenhauer, portrayed in September 1945 in the ruins of Dresden, working on the painting *View of the Japanische Palais after the bombing*. These heterogeneous elements –Picasso and the images of war– served the function of sharing meaning before activating the students in personal research and, therefore, artistic design.

Even without showing them, the images of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict appeared spontaneously in the imagination of the participants of the second edition of the *Visual and Plastic Art Design* workshop (March 2022), proposing themselves in a dramatic and non-intentional way as 'referents of reality'. The interesting fact, here, is not the political-ideological embroidery that can be superimposed on the background of the images of war, but the realization that cultural awareness is already an 'expression', to the extent that it is the very reality of the world in which we all live that presents us the bill of a media-globalized civilization. Therefore, empathy/indifference may also be aesthetic values, if they display a feeling/insensitivity of the suffering of the 'other', who is no longer –if he ever was– far away from those who are called to the competence of a cultural expression.

It should be stressed, however, that the didactic approach practiced in the *Visual and Technical Artistic Design* laboratory was not exclusively discursive, conceptual or "ethical/social" in nature. The students' critical and reflective thinking, their 'cultural awareness and expression', were in fact stimulated and accompanied mainly by direct experience with the artistic materials proposed by the teachers: the charcoal technique, for the graphic-painting *atelier*, and the *papier-mâché* technique for the plastic-manipulative *atelier*.

Concepts as images

According to Schönau's warning (2014), it is not helpful for the subject-author who tries his hand at expression through images to be overwhelmed by the difficulties of translating concepts into visual form: "The best thing a teacher can do in the classroom when supporting students in their search for meaning, is to prevent students from drowning in the complexity to visualize their ideas" (p. 306). Caution is therefore a must, both because art teachers can sometimes have a tendency to 'conceptualize' the

task –perhaps in the wake of certain contemporary art, minimalist in its aesthetic production and apparently lacking in technical skills (Bertan, 2004, p. 23)– and because it would not be gratifying for a relatively inexperienced author to find that what he or she has executed is a clumsy approximation of predefined models (available or implicit), or a poor translation of what could be more effectively expressed through words or writing.

Parallel to these methodological indications is the need to address the proverbial difficulty many have in responding to the request to draw. Here, in fact, emerges from a large part of the population, adults and pre-adolescents, the technical and representational foreignness to graphic language, a phenomenon that the literature has dealt with for decades and from different perspectives (Cohn, 2012; Carista et al., 2016; Pizzo Russo, 1988). On the other hand, the commitment to give form to a content is equivalent to the “semantic/procedural structures” (Case & Okamoto, 1996, p. 23) that has been contextualized in the *Visual and Plastic Art Design* workshop.

RESULTS

Manifestations of visual meanings as expressive choices

Individual fragments from *Guernica*, on the one hand, and individual iconographic research on the theme of war, on the other, represented a “more effective point of departure for learning” (Schönau, 2014, p. 306). These sources acted as a sort of ‘referential scaffolding’ necessary for students to initiate strategies of expression in both visual languages of two- and three-dimensional form. The didactic path, as already outlined in paragraph *Analysis of the artwork, extension to the processes involved*, began with a dialogic frontal lesson in order to share with students the inner sense of Arnheim’s reading of *Guernica* (process B, paragraph *Analysis of Cultural awareness and expression*



Figs. 2, 3 Students of the *Visual and Plastic Art Design* workshop, *D'après Guernica*, 2021, papier-mâché, wood, wire.

competence) and together to mobilize the generalization of meaning in authors closer in time (process A, paragraph *Analysis of Cultural awareness and expression competence*).

In the images below, we have a partial sample of the various phases of the elaboration of the personal project by some students and we can see how, in some cases, the authors preferred to dedicate themselves to a technical investigation of the artistic reference (Figures 2, 3), while in others the symbolic significance was privileged as the aim of the creative action (Figures 4, 5).

Each student was also invited, at the end of the block week, to present his or her final work to the large group—a choice between the graphic and the plastic experience, or a hybrid of the two—commenting in written words on the themes that, in his or her opinion, were essential in the enjoyment of the artifact.

To prepare for the final presentation task, the students were given a self-regulating criterion in the form of a key question: “Is what I have made really expressing what I had in mind?”. The question, taken up by Schönau (2014, p. 306), sealed the experience of the entire *Visual and Plastic Art Design* week, with particular emphasis on aspects of awareness in the visual forms of cultural expression.

It is of relevance that the preliminary exercises in both techniques were widely indebted to the Picassian reference, and that also when adding new interpretative reasons in the final artwork, the ‘point of departure for learning’ was still clearly traceable (Figure 6).

DISCUSSION

Emerging conceptions

With respect to the objectives of the research (cf. paragraph *Analysis of Cultural awareness and expression competence*) it can be concluded that observing the competences manifested, the aims of a critical approach to cultural



Fig. 4 Student of the *Visual and Plastic Art Design* workshop, *Nuclear down*, 2021. Charcoal on paper, cardboard, wire, *papier-mâché*.

expression, together with the willingness to be involved in expression from a transversal perspective, have been achieved. In particular, the immersive nature of the artistic-creative experience ('cultural expression') in relation to the discursive intentionality ('awareness') triggered by the theme of art and war became evident. This theme has dramatically imposed itself in the news of Spring 2022 with the war events in Ukraine.

This can be confirmed by reading the statement of artistic intent of the two students authors of the *War Notebook* (Figure 6):

The work we made in *papier-mâché* represents a hand holding a notebook. Through the work we want to convey two opposite and distinct realities: on the one side, the importance of teaching related to sensitive issues such as war, in order to prevent the recurrence of these atrocities over time. On the other side, people, especially children, living in an extreme situation of



Fig. 5 Student of the Visual and Plastic Art Design workshop, *D'après Guernica*, 2021, papier-mâché, charcoal on paper, cardboard. Original interpretative element in wings added to Picassian reference.

war, unconsciously learn indelible experiences through survival. Despite this separation between the two scenarios, they share the lessons of war.

Another female student, who plastically depicted a human brain, partially split between the two hemispheres, ascribed a personal meaning that draws from reflection on the non-healable wounds of a traumatic experience. Here, however, the emphasis is also on denouncing the 'unseen enemy' who perpetrated the act of violence, even in *Guernica*, the enemy of Spanish civilians is not represented, although the *J'accuse* is implied and clearly addressed by Picasso. The events in Ukraine have unfortunately accentuated these days the permeability of the military/civilian entity, in a call to arms that no longer has anything heroic or culturally constructive about it: it is just the defeat of reason in the face of decisions that do not take into account any sense of human reciprocity.

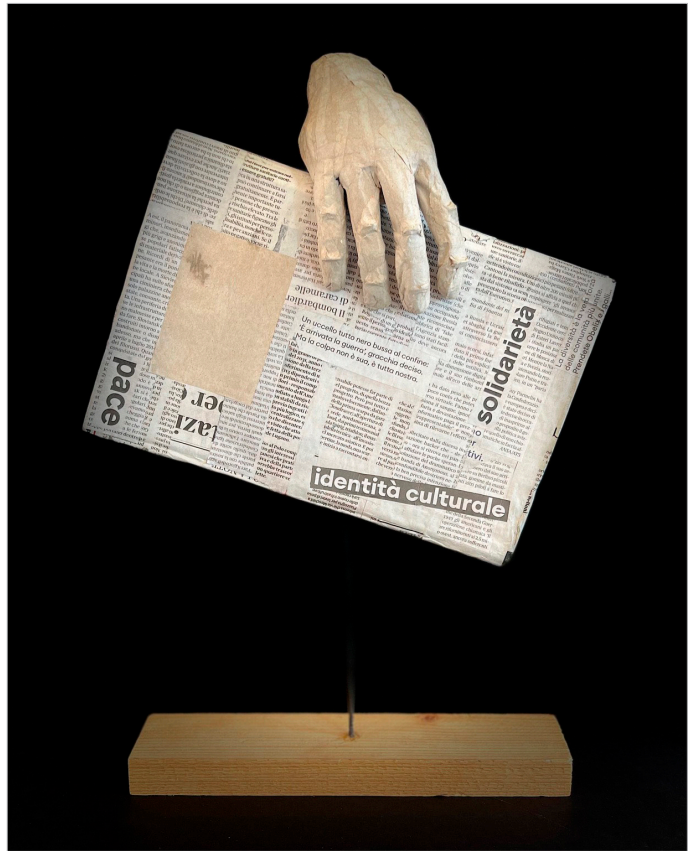
An additional emotion I wanted to communicate is the conflict between the rational and the irrational. Very often we are faced with choices and are free to decide whether to listen to our heart or our head. In the case of war, soldiers often have to go off and leave their families behind and fight for their country: but then they actually lose their faculty of free choice. I personally believe that many more people than you might think suffer the psychological repercussions of other people's acts every day. I wanted to be able to represent in my own way this thought that I feel very close to.

Echoes of Arnheim's thought return in these words: "a world where very similar events occur everywhere without a strong unitary organization".

Conclusions

Once again, emotional emphasis is confirmed to strongly contribute to the motivational background and dispositional aspects of the subject called upon to express himself visually; however, it cannot predispose him in terms of the

Fig. 6 Student of the *Visual and Plastic Art Design* workshop, *War Notebook*, 2022, papier-mâché, wood, wire.



technical-formal requirements that are responsible for the enunciation of a complete expression. For this purpose, the laboratory dimension of the experience in direct contact with artistic materials is necessary, even if the profile of competence recognized by the context of exercise does not aspire to the excellence of the figurative artistic domain.

As highlighted in the literature on pre-service teachers education and their identity development in relation to creativity (Bae, 2014; Barbot, 2018; Bryer & Grimbeek, 2005; Chong et al., 2005; Hudson & Hudson, 2007; Melnick & Meister, 2008; Patston et al., 2017; Zimmerman, 1994), the sense of (in)adequacy towards modes of expression that do not easily fit into the personal framework of perceived self-

efficacy may lead to neglect those disciplinary areas that represent them in compulsory education (Artistic and expressive languages of Art education).

On the other hand, uncertainties remain with regard to the third objective (process C, paragraph *Analysis of Cultural awareness and expression competence*), the overcoming, by students who aspire to become generalist teachers, of a 'professional self-perception' as suppliers of *Best practices*. Some students, in fact, at the end of the 2021 week declared that their expectation regarding the contents of the workshop contemplated, specifically, the didactic transmission of pre-packaged creative/manual activities, usable in the context of primary school. Even if we need to study this empirical result more specifically, we can hypothesize that the demand to manage the expressive issue in the school context by resorting to proven prototypes in the form of *Best practices* is due to the relative unpreparedness for art of a large percentage of the population, which continues to perceive cultural expression as a matter for experts.

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