Assignments

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Abstract

This paper discusses the possibilities of providing assignments in art education against the background of certain cultural conditions. Starting from this basic classification, systematic quality criteria are developed and tested in two practical examples. The procedure leads to an analysis grid that makes it possible to compare tasks in art teaching.

Keywords

Three observations at the beginning

Persistent assignments

Every Tuesday afternoon at the Munich Art Academy, students who do an internship at school in the morning come together for a seminar. Here the experiences gained in class are discussed, systematized and evaluated. This semester was primarily concerned with the question of how to

create assignments. And there was an interesting déjà vu experience: the example the students reported about was familiar to everyone - at least somehow. Some could even remember having been given exactly this assignment as pupils themselves. A search on the Internet quickly revealed that this assignment had obviously been widely used for a long time (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Screenshot www.sippel.de/kunst/raub.htm

It is quite obvious that there are certain assignments or types of assignments that are passed on from generation to generation of teachers - independent of the respective context (which type of school, which curriculum, which temporal or local framing, which current didactic or educational paradigm). Perhaps because they fit so well with the general ideas of art teaching, perhaps simply because they "always work". I call these kinds of assignments 'persistent assignments'.

National assignment cultures

Sorbonne University is giving a lecture on the type of assignments that are typical for France. It is proposed in the French curricula (programmes d'arts plastiques) and official handouts (EDUSCOL 2018) of the French Ministry of Education. She presents a list of five implicit

commandments and prohibitions as 'hidden agenda', which of course are nowhere formulated in this way, but which clearly emerge as patterns after her analysis. These five guidelines show very specific ideas of a 'good assignment'. Her list is:

1. 1. You shall banish imitation and the use of models.

2. You shall not explain (or very few).

3. You shall be suspicious of technique and of the transmission of technical skills.

4. shall favour singularity and thinking out of the box.

5. shall encourage the useless over the useful and banish the decorative.

A comparison with for instance the German-speaking world shows that models (in the sense of orientation points) are indeed permitted there, that much is explained, that technical skills are very well rewarded, and that there are many assignments that are oriented towards the world in which we live. Obviously, there are culture- or country-specific types or patterns that might be found in the "persistent assignments".

Authentic assignments

A final observation, at my former, quite large school we were five art teachers, sometimes even more. And each one was - for himself - his own personality. At our school there were always small, mostly quickly hung exhibitions of student works, in showcases and on pin boards. They are used for the discussion in the class, but also to show what is happening in art education.

At each exhibition, it was immediately clear to us colleagues and also to the students which teacher had given the respective assignment. Each assignment was linked to a certain teacher personality: One could find something open to experimentation - or structured in small parts, there was free painting - or applied design, the assignments were sometimes related to proven

classical art - or to contemporary artistic tendencies. Obviously, the assignments were always individual, related to an authorship, perhaps even authentic.

It turns out that the triggers for a certain assignment are often based on the teacher's fascination with a certain material, a specific challenge, a special process, or even a certain work of art, a peculiar question. Perhaps it is precisely this initial fascination that makes the individual assignment so specific again - despite national or persistent patterns.

Typology of Assignments

It is obvious that assignments in art are a complex subject. This is a tremendous strength of our discipline - and unfortunately often a weakness. Diversity testifies to the freedom we enjoy, to the opportunity to engage with our own interests and passions (which mathematics teachers, for example, are not allowed to do). In extreme cases, however, diversity can also lead to arbitrariness and an uncritical "anything goes". That would be fatal, as it concerns the most important methodical tool we have. That's why they should be good. But what are good assignments?

Before this can be discussed, it is helpful to distinguish between different types. This can be done, for example, according to the three most important functions an assignment can cover. On

Table 1: Functions of assignments

Type	Function in the learning process	Grades?
Training exercise	Training of already known skills, consolidation of skills. Goal: training	None
Learning or development assignment	Apply, modify and explore acquired skills and competences in new contexts Cope with challenges, further develop competences or develop new competences (problem solving) Goal: discovering learning	Theoretically none, but in reality always
Test	Competences already acquired are applied. Goal: Measurement of the performance level	Always

the one hand there are simple training exercises, on the other there are learning or development tasks, and finally examinations or tests.

Through a **training exercise**, which is not so widespread in art education, the pupils practice or train already known skills with the aim of consolidating them. For instance various hatching techniques (see fig. 2) can be practiced, or proportions of a face on a study sheet. In three-dimensional techniques handicraft skills can be trained. Based on the idea of training, such assignments are consequently not graded.

Figure 2: Screenshot of "Practice hatching" net search

The second case, that is also not very widespread, is **examination or test** items, which are of course ranked or graded. These are therefore concerned with the diagnosis of achievement levels for competences acquired, for example in the case of central final exams. Since the diagnosis is usually associated with a number, i.e. a grade, one can also speak of "measurement" of levels.[1]

The **learning or development assignment** is at the centre of art teaching. It occupies the largest space and is therefore it is in the focus of the following. This type of assignment serves

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[1]It is not the place here to discuss the pedagogically extremely important topic of grading or teacher feedback, but for the sake of completeness we would like to refer to the detailed discussion and development of models and instruments in the European Reference Framework for Visual Literacy (Wagner & Schönau. 2016).

to encourage the pupils to explorative learning. The result is a gain in competences that are only developed when the assignment is solved, when the theme is explored, when solution strategies are developed (therefore often called problem-solving assignments). The point is that the student can do something after the assignment that he could not do before. The spectrum for **development assignments** is broad, tried and tested in many ways. Examples have been published thousands of times. The spectrum ranges from applying already acquired skills or competences in new contexts (the change of context makes it necessary to test and thus modify solutions and thus facilitates learning) to overcoming completely new, unfamiliar challenges that make the development of new competences necessary. In most cases such development assignments are also used for grading throughout Europe. This is not an unproblematic fact, since the necessary free and playful discovery of previously unknown solutions – a typical approach for our subject – is not really compatible with external assessment.

Of course, this typology proposed here does not cover other essential questions. For example: Are assignments complex or simple? Are they open or closed? How long does the solving take? What character do they have and where are the reference situations?

Table 2: Characteristics of assignments

Type	Adressed sub-competences	Complexity Structure	Reference to situations, art works	Setting (social dimension)
Training exercise				
Learning or development assignment	↕	↕	↕	↕
Test				

Assignments can be differentiated for instance with regard to the time required to cope with

them: from a project (complex, differentiated, long period) to an impulse assignment (short time, reduced scope, narrow objectives). Depending on the level of performance of the learning group, the degree of internal structure will also differ: While in some assignments just a problem without further explanation is addressed, others are structured in small steps with work instructions, providing a detailed solution with detailed supporting hints (open vs. closed assignments). Assignments can focus on application or they include reflection and metacognitive strategies. Finally, assignments always have a specific relation to a situation or a problem, i.e. they have a concrete topic. This topic can e.g.

- originate from the world in which children and young people live (e.g. their interests in dressing, playing, mobility or media consumption).

- It can also be derived from the general educational objectives. For example, which topic is suitable for promoting intercultural dialogue, education for sustainable development, etc.?

- Or the topic is defined primarily from its relation to art. This happens either in relation to specific genres (e.g. self-portrait, study of nature, furniture design, poster graphics, etc.). Or, certain works of art are "godfathers" for the assignment: the teacher is fascinated, for example, by Baselitz's head over, by Damian Hirst's skulls, by Rubens's love of color, or by Picasso's Desmoiselles. He wants his students to try it out, to make similar experiences.

Finally, the social form used (individual, partner or group work) forms a final criterion for differentiation.

Quality criteria for the formulation of (development) assignments

The differentiation proposed above offers an overview of the repertoire available, an important element of conscious teaching. However, it fails to answer the central question of what is a "good assignment". Various studies are available on this subject, most of which provide very similar catalogues of characteristics for 'good teaching'. These general criteria can be summarized as TRACE (Transparency, Relevance, Attractiveness, Competence orientation, Embedding); they lay the ground for good teaching. These include:

1. Transparency

Is the assignment transparent? Is it clear what it is all about? Do all pupils have a fair chance because they know what is expected? Are they aware of the expectations? First, this criterion includes clarity as to whether the assignment is about grades, free experimentation or training (see typology above). What is the intended learning outcome? Probably the only sensible way to achieve this transparency is to formulate the assignment in writing. The formulation makes these points clear and the pupils can then also refer to them (e.g. in a discussion about grading). As Schoppe stresses, the consistent use of operators (or partial competences, of which I speak in the following) is of "enormous importance" (Schoppe 2016).

2. Relevance

Each assignment represents a requirement that has its justification in relation to the visual domain (art, design, architecture ...) or to situations that correspond to everyday life (e.g. decoding political election advertising, improving school building design, developing a programme for a holiday trip ...). Ultimately, it is about the appropriateness of the content, the topics. The relevance of the assignment is often enough demanded by the pupils when they ask why they

should do or learn this or that.

3. Attractiveness

Is the assignment attractive for heterogeneous groups? Increasing heterogeneity on the one hand and increasing demands due to individualisation make it difficult, to develop assignments for diverse, inclusive groups. Also with regard to the educational paradigm of individualisation, inclusion or cultural diversity, good assignments must therefore offer variations with different degrees of difficulty and thus take into account different levels of competence. The question of whether the assignment permits different levels of competence is central to the design of assignments.

4. Competence orientation

Is the assignment competence-oriented? The competence models that are formulated in the respective curricula, name - usually in a meaningful way - partial competences as well as interdisciplinary competences (such as social, self- and methodological competences). A good assignment addresses these in a clear manner, in each case through a specific selection and setting of priorities. However, all three indispensable aspects of competence (knowledge, skills and attitudes) always become visible in the solution of the assignment. A good assignment also takes into account the possibility of securing and consolidating acquired competences through phases of reflection (metacognition) in the process or in a final presentation.

5. Embedding

Is the assignment correctly embedded? Assignments always are given in a certain context. There is always a topic before and one afterwards. In this sense, good assignments follow on from what took place in the classroom before and enable meaningful connections for the

following lessons. Of course, this embedding also applies with regard to the age or level of performance of the learning group. Also, the use of the different social forms becomes meaningful in this context.

Two examples

The following two examples are examined by using particularly the fourth criterion, referring to a competence model, to their specific set of selected sub-competences in art education as well as metacognition/reflection and social, personal and methodological competences. The structural model of the CEFR_VL is used here as a reference point. This clarifies which sub-competences the pupils should acquire in coping with the assignments, and thus also promotes transparency for the pupils (see criterion 1). Both assignments were given by experienced colleagues. I asked them for a "typical", "everyday", "normal" but nevertheless good example for the publication and they kindly made it available to me. I did not influence the selection.

Assignment 1	Assignment 2
"Disco - Dancing figures in space" (DIN A 2)	**"Game board" (DIN A 2) (sub-assignment of "Develop and design a game")**
Work instruction	**Work instruction**
1. **Draw several dancing figures in a room.** 2. **"Illuminate" the scene with three spotlights.** 3. **Now, color your picture.**	**Shape groups of 2-4 students. Develop and design together an exciting multi-player board game. The game scenario shall be based on ancient cultures. Use suitable materials and tools for the realization of your idea and pay attention to an aesthetically convincing design.**
Context • 13 - 14 year olds • 4 x 90 minutes • Material: Guache, brushes, cardboard up to DIN A 2, proportion schemes human figure • Curriculum: This requires, among other things, the representation of real objects in order to observe reality closely and the use of spatial illusion.	**Context** • 10 - 12 year olds • 2 x 90 minutes • Material: various pencils, colours, brushes, cardboard up to DIN A 2, cutter and glue, various art books as illustrative material • Curriculum: it requires a conscious perception of the characteristics of materials, evaluation with regard to their suitability for creative projects, as well as description of architecture and objects of ancient cultures.
  Figure 3 and 4: Two results (draft and final result)	 Figure 5 and 6: Two results

Situation of reference	Situation of reference
Self-observation (of one's own body) and observation of social interaction during puberty.	Egyptian art as a fantasy world. Childlike desire to play.

Profile of the assignment

The assignment was analyzed under the leading question, how strongly the assignment addresses the sub-competences of the model of the CEFR_VL (strong = 3, weak = 0).

Table 3: Profile of assignment 1

Sub-competences:	Very strong 3	Strong 2	Weak 1	Very weak 0
perceive	x			
empathise		x		
describe	x			
analyse	x			
interpret				x
critique				
judge				x
value				x
create		x		
envision		x		
experiment				x
draft			x	
create	x			
carry out / realise	x			
communicate				x
present				x
use				x
Transversal Competences	Very strong	Strong	Weak	Very weak
Social Competence				x
Methodological Competence		x		
Self Competence			x	
Further Aspects				
Metacognition / Reflexion				x
Knowledge			x (*)	
Attitudes	x (**)			

(*) proportions, color mixing; (**) diligence, endurance

Profile of the assignment

The assignment was analyzed under the leading question, how strongly the assignment addresses the sub-competences of the model of the CEFR_VL (strong = 3, weak = 0).

Table 4: Profile of assignment 2

Sub-competences:	Very strong 3	Strong 2	Weak 1	Very weak 0
perceive		x		
empathise				x
describe				x
analyse				x
interpret			x	
critique				
judge			x	
value		x		
create				
envision				x
experiment				x
draft	x			
create	x			
carry out / realise	x			
communicate	x			
present			x	
use		x		
Transversal Competences	Very strong	Strong	Weak	Very weak
Social Competence	x			
Methodological Competence	x			
Self Competence			x	
Further Aspects				
Metacognition / Reflexion	x			
Knowledge		x (*)		
Attitudes			x (**)	

(*) ancient cultures; (**) effort, commitment, dedication, diligence

Justification of the table values given / interpretation of the assignment	Justification of the table values given / interpretation of the assignment
In the first part of this assignment it is demanded that the pupils are able to reproduce proportions and attitudes of human figures in a lifelike way (to examine and describe them artistically) or to arrange the figures in the drawing in such a way that a spatial effect is created. This means that the pupils first envisage the dancers in their imagination, depict them as realistically as possible and thus design them. Therefore they have schemata and construction methods at their disposal, which they apply (realize). In the second and third part, they show that they can find a coloured solution with the help of contrasts (geometric - organic forms, coloured - black/white, light - dark, surface - space).	The sub-assignment of a larger project (developing a complete game, from the idea to the realization and then playing it) is not itself subdivided into steps, although the pupils are younger compared to the assignment on the left. The emphasis is first of all on drafting and creating. Since - according to the wording - "an exciting ... board game" shall be developed, without giving any further clues or specifications, imagination is emphasized. After all, the game should work for several players, i.e. the pupils must also consider that the game board must be comprehensible for more people (communicating). The importance of the result finally emphasizes the craftsmanship of the realization.

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The assignment therefore focuses above all on following aspects: to depict something lifelike from the imagination and with the help of schemata, and to be able to compose a picture according to formal aspects. The partial competences of the structural model of the CEFR-VL are addressed above all: imagine, design, create and realize as well as the necessary perceptions (describing and investigating).

Social competence plays neither a role in the topic of the assignment nor in the solution (e.g. by solution as group work). Methodological competences are most likely promoted and demanded by the complex process of realization, which requires careful planning. Reflection / metacognition is not specifically addressed.

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Since the theme of the game scenario is based on ancient culture, previously dealt with in class, the pupils also apply their acquired knowledge of this epoch (knowledge) in solving this assignment.

The appeal to use suitable materials and tools for the realization of the idea - again without making any further specifications - addresses methodological competences, as long as the teacher does not give any further suggestions and tips. This is supported by the fact that the formulation doesn't give individual steps; the pupils therefore have to structure the work process themselves, especially in the group. This group work also demands social competences.

The hint formulated in the assignment that the goal is an "aesthetically convincing design" finally focuses a second time on reflection, whereby it can be assumed that the children's age is overstretched.

Relating the two assignments to each other with regard to the competence-dimensions of the CEFR_VL model, the following picture emerges from the respective average values.
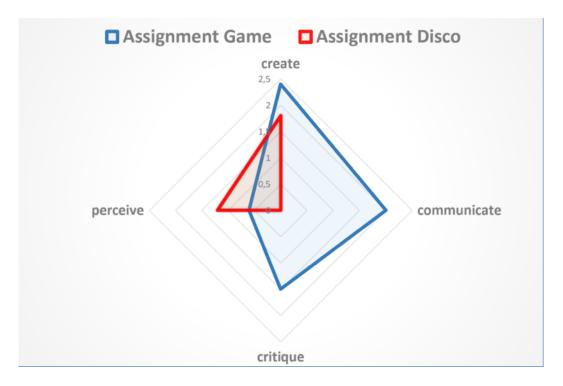

Diagram 1: Comparison of profiles of the two assignments in respect to the four competence-dimensions.

This comparison shows that characteristic profiles of assignments can be worked out and visualized with such assessment methods. It becomes clear here, for example, that - although both assignments have a clear focus on creation / production - the board assignment (#2) is more balanced and broader. The disco assignment, on the other hand, has a more one-sided profile, whereby perception here refers primarily to visual perception: The design is carried out on the basis of previously perceived schemata, which are applied in one's own pictures.

This cannot be further deepened here, but hopefully such an approach, developed here, will make it clear what the individual assignments make possible and - above all - what they do not make possible. I.e., what "position" they occupy in the huge field of possibilities. In this way,

the competence model of the CEFR_VL not only becomes an instrument for assessment, but can also become a useful steering instrument for the development of assignments.

Résumé

This instrument, however, does not allow - and this should be emphasised very clearly here - to make an evaluative judgement. This means, we cannot clarify whether a certain assignment profile is right or wrong, good or bad. For example, the decision to divide the first assignment into individual steps may be based on a lower ability to concentrate during puberty or on a specific, restless class situation. Even group work at this age can sometimes be impossible. The decision about the specific profile lies exclusively in the pedagogical responsibility of the teacher - in the respective concrete situation. The aim of this article is therefore not to use competence models as "normative sticks" in order to make certain practices the standard and to discredit others. Rather, a reference is named in order to reflect on one's own practice on a reflective base, and then, if necessary, modify this practice. Covering a broad and above all reflected spectrum or repertoire is crucial for successful teaching.

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