



# Good enough art teacher

## Developing visual identity in teacher education

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### Introduction

As we live in a world that unpredictably quickly becomes more and more picture-/image-filled, we do not often stop to think how old pictures/images as media are. The oldest messages with pictures are over 2,000 years old and are tremendously reminiscent of those images and signs we still use. The bulls in the caves of Altamira tell us a story in the same type of ‘picture language’ as the language used in the discussion sites in the Internet.

## The academic discourse between the arts

As human beings, we have many ways in which we can define ourselves or sum up who we are. We can identify ourselves as children of our parents or parents to our children, as citizens of a nation or an area, as a professional in a certain field, or through our hobbies - the list goes on. All of the attributes we use to define ourselves shape our individual identities. Thus, identity does not have a stable, continuous form: each of us redefines our identity at different times and in different situations. This fragmented identity is never complete because of its process-like nature, but is in a constant state of shaping and perhaps even developing (Hall 1999).

In this study, we ask how art education students describe their identities. The starting point for this study was an interest in finding out whether these students defined themselves more as future teachers or as artists, and how they believed that they could combine these two different professional identities. We collected data from a course entitled *Academic Discourse between the Arts* (3 ECTS) that we had designed and held. The course was reorganized every year over a period of five years (2011–2015), and it was targeted towards the students from four different universities: visual arts education students at Aalto University, music education students at Sibelius Academy, dance and theatre education students at Theatre Academy, and primary school teacher<sup>1</sup> education students specializing in art education at the University of Tampere. The goal of the course was to guide pedagogically oriented students from different fields of art into a dialog. According to Huttunen, identity is a result of social negotiation. Identity deals with the question of who a person is in relation to others (Ropo 2009; 2019; Huttunen 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> In Finland “primary school teacher” (or “class teacher”) refers to a teacher who teaches grades 1-6 in basic education. Primary school teachers have a master’s degree in education.

The purpose of the course was to encourage academic discourse between the arts, in which students would open up, discuss and reformulate their own ideas on teaching, examine the connection between education and artistic expression, skill, dialog and identity, among other things. Our aim was to find, together with the students, more precise definitions for the concepts that often appear loosely worded in art discourse: definitions associated with the students' worlds of experience. During the course, students also undertook visual and literary assignments: identity pictures and stories. With identity pictures we referred to constructed portraits in which the students designed a picture, selected the location and decided how to settle into the environment and what props to use. The idea was to summarize their personal views on arts 'teacherhood' into one photo. Later on, the photos were interpreted and discussed in groups. After the discussion, the students wrote their identity stories in which they opened up their identity picture after their own interpretation and the collective interpretation process based on their photo. These stories and photos are used as data for this chapter; they provided us with versatile material upon which to examine the identity of art teaching students.

*Who am I? Where do I come from? Where do I belong to, and who can I become?* These are the most important, sensitive and hardest questions of human life (Huttunen 2013). The students taking our course were in the phase of their lives in which these questions are reflected upon most passionately. In general, students construct their identities both in their studies and in their social networks. Therefore, our course fell upon a sensitive and fertile ground. As one of the students summarized, "I felt that reflecting on my identity was useful, and in my opinion the discussions with other students were very fruitful. The identity pictures opened up in a very new way, and we received the tools to construct our own identities at the same time. I also felt that it was very rewarding for the discussion that the students came from different universities."

Inkeri Sava and Arja Katainen (2004) argue that the view of oneself as “I projects” that are constructed in social relationships and that are constantly evolving makes room for different identity experiments. Sava refers to Zigmund Bauman when she argues that the modern human being is on a pilgrimage towards finding him- or herself. The postmodern identity is roaming, wandering and touring. Therefore, identity work can be like play. One tries different roles in different situations, one constructs and rejects them and reconstructs them again. Those graduating as art teachers are in the phase of life when the play of students becomes reality later on in the working world.

## Reflective photo

### A look into a magnifying review mirror

In our study, we examine reflective photos, visual narratives, in which the students construct their identities. We had several reasons for choosing visual narratives as our data. Being visual arts professionals ourselves, we believe in the power of visual storytelling, and, as researchers, in the possibilities of visual ethnography. Like Sarah Pink (2001), we believe that photography is an excellent tool for observation and documentation and a useful technique for making notes, for both researchers and artists. This perception is, of course, based on the ‘veracity’ of photography as well as its accuracy and non-selectivity. The camera captures whatever the photographer chooses to point it at.

In our project, we use photos a little differently: we emphasize their story-like narrative nature. Photos can tell stories, but they can also interpret color and shape reality. Photos can also skew reality: it is very easy to believe a lie told by a photo. We know that, in their identity pictures, the students constructed their identities

through photography; they told us exactly what they wanted to about themselves. That is what makes it interesting.

More than anything, the identity pictures are reflective tools. Relative to learning, reflection is also necessary. Profound learning requires an understanding of theory and practice. This kind of intentional understanding is the objective in the reflective process. In dictionaries, reflection is defined as *meditation*, *consideration* and *mirroring*. Through reflection, we mirror our own learning; rendering it visible so that we can observe it and, if necessary, change it for the better (Winnicot 1981).

## Peirce's triadic structure of signs

In this chapter, we focus on the reflective photos of the students and leave their written stories in the background. We want to handle the photos as independent narratives without explanations or interpretations of the students. As a tool, we use the well-known and often used semiotic theory of signs by Charles S. Peirce, the American pragmatic philosopher. According to Peirce, a sign, a piece of art, or in this context, a photo, can relate to reality in three different ways: as icons, as indexes and as symbols. Peirce's theory is broadly applied, sometimes in a brutally simplistic way depending on the use. (See Seppänen 2002.) We, too, use Peirce's theory in a little unorthodox way, perhaps, applying it for our purposes<sup>2</sup>.

An **iconic** picture is similar to the object it represents. One characteristic to drawing and other visual work is portrayal. For some reason, we are fascinated with the idea that a cluster of lines that seem to be formed arbitrarily or that the contrast of overtones and colors begin to look like something, to portray something. For example, a picture of a rabbit is formed on a surface. A depiction

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<sup>2</sup> In the following parts of text we present our application of Peirce's theory. We have created it for many years while being artists and art teachers.

that is understood by anyone, regardless of one's mother tongue. A photo is in its essence always iconic, because with a documentary photo, especially, there is always a counterpart in reality. Many traffic signs and guideposts are based on iconism. For example, the sign for a road curve shows the curve of the road ahead. It is, however, noteworthy that a picture can be iconic even without a counterpart, a referent, in reality. For example, the portrait of Mona-Lisa is hardly interesting because we wonder whose picture it is - at least, not before Dan Brown's book "The Da Vinci Code". Is it even possible to know if there is a counterpart for this picture? Instead, during centuries people have pondered the mystery behind Mona-Lisa's smile. We can, with our imagination, create and construct iconic pictures, for instance the worlds of sci-fi films. Likewise, the identity photos of the students are constructed photos and do not, despite their iconism, necessarily portray the reality as it is. However, that is what makes them interesting.

The **index** sign has a causal relation to reality. For example, smoke is a sign of a fire. A flag on a flagpole indicates a flag day or a family celebration. In the field of photography or visual art, index can also be related to a postmodern characteristic in which a piece of art refers in almost every case to other pieces of art. A picture of a rabbit indicates to the visual world of Joseph Beuys in the European context and in the Finnish context to Risto Suomi's production. In addition, movies refer to other movies and their meaning is also constructed by the meanings of those movies they refer to. The index relationship can be constructed consciously or by the viewer. Therefore, in this case, the interpretation of the identity photos depends upon the experiences of the interpreter. We interpret the students' identity photos from our own perspective knowing that we may alienate from the meaning that the student has intended.

**Symbol** is a conventional sign, the meaning of which is based on a convention. We have agreed that, for example, some letter combinations mean something. The written language is an example

of a fully contractual sign language. Visual signs can also be contractual, such as the Christian symbols, but the connection is fuzzier than in written language. For example, a rabbit like other animals can have many different symbolic meanings depending on where geographically and in what type of environment it is being interpreted. In addition, every individual can also see the rabbit representing something or a feature in his or her own way.

On the other hand, visual language is in a way universal. Pictures can be interpreted and understood by anyone regardless of nationality or background. The meanings constructed and based on pictures, however, are always linked to cultural traditions as well as to the subjectively and experientially built symbolism.

## What ‘catches the eye’ in the identity photos?

Barthes (1980) separates *studium* and *punctum* in his analysis of photos. *Studium* is something in a photo that generates common interest, but is not truly anything mind-blowing. *Punctum*, on the other hand, means that the attention of the viewer becomes attached to something, perhaps, to a detail or something else that makes him or her stop and linger with the picture or detail in the picture longer. The viewer is not necessarily aware of what it is that draws his or her attention straight away. In a good photograph, there must be this *punctum* that penetrates the *studium* so that the viewer pays attention to the photo. The Finnish expression “*pistää silmään*” (catch the eye) describes well the thoughts expressed by Barthes.

*Punctum* may also be something invisible. Barthes (1980, 148–151) explains how a portrait of a young man grasped a different meaning from the fact that he was about to be executed. One can conclude from the photo that he was a convict, because he has handcuffs, but his doom is not visible otherwise. In the same way, our own interpretations are affected by everything else we know about the

photos. Particularly, the art field we know and what the identity photos also represent.

One problem of interpreting a picture and also of art education occurs when we try to understand what we see in the pictures, we, as Kotkavirta (2009) puts it, verbalize pictures into words and translate them into another kind of syntax and semantics. This happens whenever we focus our attention on the meanings the pictures have generated, meanings that are not necessarily made consciously at all. The aim to verbalize and become aware of the meanings and images the pictures carry collides with its limits and fails to some extent. After all, a picture always contains much more than what we are able to put into words. Pictures often generate images and effects that are impossible to become verbalized. Sometimes it is good to just let the pictures talk in their own language without futile explaining.

Regardless of this, we boldly begin to verbalize some of the interpretations of the identity photos we have chosen. We trust in our own interpretations that are subjective, but made in a mutual dialogue. We have travelled with the students' identity photos for a long time, examining them in different situations and from different points of view. We hope our readers continue these spontaneously developed interpretations. As the authors of this chapter and having processed dialog in our dissertations and produced art in a dialogical process, we have developed an organic method of approaching, reflecting on, and understanding phenomena. Both of us are hermeneutic by nature, and we want to emphasize particularly the reflective and dialogical nature of the process of understanding. We feel, like Veli-Matti Värri, that dialog is an indispensable method in teaching as well (Värri 1997; see also Buber 1999). In our opinion, dialog has proved to be a useful method in encountering students from different universities and art fields. Instead of the traditionally highly narcissistic art talk, dialogs are polyphonic, listened to with sensitive ears searching humbly for the understanding of others and oneself (Gadamer 2004; Merta & Pullinen 2008). In the dialogs, strong,



shared experience was connected with people's own starting points or, as Juha Suoranta puts it in his article, "You have to remember your starting point." Subsequently, it is possible to reflect on and break down the strong experience with the dear ones – even over a long period of time (Suoranta 2008).



*Photo 1 (from the archives of the authors by permission of an anonymous student photographer)*

Photo 1, in our opinion, represents an iconic image of the work of a primary school teacher. At the same time, while we see recognizable, even timeless details, of a classroom, the photo also reveals the clichés that we associate with teacher's work. The thing in which we are interested in the picture, what 'catches the eye', is the magnifying glass and the eye that has been magnified. We know that the student in the photo is graduating as a primary school teacher with a qualification to work as a visual arts teacher as well. The magnifying glass is related to investigating things. Even a few years ago, visual arts was primarily called self-expression, the practice of the eye and the hand. However, in our opinion, the photo tells us about the new direction of visual art

education. The new national curriculum defines the goal of visual art education – to guide pupils to examine and express culturally diverse reality by means of art (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014).



*Photo 2 (from the archives of the authors by permission of an anonymous student photographer)*

In many of the identity photos, the students strengthen the external characteristics of their own art field. Photo 2 could have the title, “Man looking like a musician”. Even the music style the student wants to represent can be interpreted from the photo. Instruments have always had a significant role in visual arts, solely because they are usually interesting in their functional design. Instruments can also have symbolic meanings, but in our data we connect the instruments

placed in a prominent space with the usage and skills needed to play them. During their studies, future music teachers, in particular, commit their identity to the skills to play and musical know-how. The elegant picture in question would work perfectly as a promo picture in his CV.



*Photo 3 (from the archives of the authors by permission of an anonymous student photographer)*

Photo 3 reveals, at least to us Finns, this student's roots in our classical and national tradition by referencing in an index kind of way to the Sibelius Monument. The sculpture is perhaps one of the most well-known public works of art in Finland, recognizable even from this unconventional visual angle. The polyphony of the organ pipes in the Sibelius Monument amplifies the identity and life values of this beautiful longhaired student. If we didn't know anything about the installation in the background of the picture, it might look a lot drearier, even distressing. For example, as a story of a tiny human being's struggle in the pressure of the societal structures. An interesting thing in the photo is the emphasis on diagonal lines. By placing the photo askew, the student gets vividness or insecurity in her photo, depending on the interpretation.



*Photo 4 (from the archives of the authors by permission of an anonymous student photographer)*

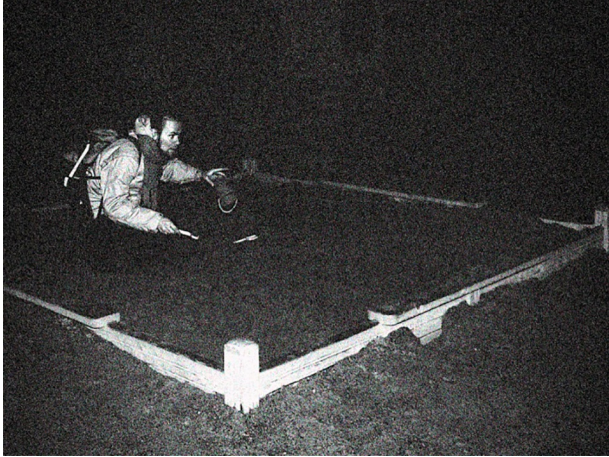
The student in Photo 4 looks as if she is carrying something important in her lap, something that she insists on keeping and showing to others. She has embraced two photos one of which can be recognized as Elina Brotherus' work "Wanderer 2" (2004). With her picture, Brotherus refers to Caspar Friedrich's romantic painting "Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer" (1818). Thus, the identity photo refers in an index way to two works of art, and it can be interpreted to carry the meanings of both of these pieces of art. In many of the other photos in our data, the students look far towards the horizon, towards future challenges. This is understandable for young students. We do not know how conscious and intentional this reference to Romanticism is. We believe that young students lead a phase in their lives where emotions, imagination and freedom are emphasized, just as the Romantics did. During Romanticism, the meaning of nature

was highlighted in the arts and people were extremely interested in the spiritual world, dreams and even the dark sides of the human mind. In addition, foreign lands and exotic places aroused the curiosity of the heroes and heroines of their time, as that of present day students. We need only a little bit of imagination to come up with the things this young girl is dreaming about.



*Photo 5 (from the archives of the authors by permission of an anonymous student photographer)*

Photo 5 differs from the identity photo stream because its content is primarily symbolic, even in the way that there are only the hands of the student visible, nothing else. The hands tell us about caring and gentleness, the tools of an educator. This strongly symbolic photo reveals the child-centered pedagogical thinking of this student. Children grow up in our hands, they get protection and safety from us as well as the light and nutrients required for growth. The color symbolism of the photo supports this interpretation. Green as the color of life emphasizes the uniqueness of the one growing up and the choice to centralize the color only to the small seedling singles it out from the picture, it 'catches the eye'. We know that the background and ethos of this student is in early childhood education.



*Photo 6 (from the archives of the authors by permission  
of an anonymous student photographer)*

Photo 6 above could be interpreted as showing the artist caught, in a way, at night doing something secret and childish, something that is important to him, but something he does not want any fuss about. Artists rarely receive regular pay for their work, and balancing between grant applications and occasional art sales is difficult. Those studying visual arts education struggle with the contradiction between the societal status of teachers and that of artists. Being a teacher is seen as bureaucratic and financially stable, whereas an artist remains in the margins with frail safety nets.

## Conclusions

According to Inkeri Sava (2004), the essential question is whether the wandering self in the postmodern era is one's own choice or a place where one drifts in social circumstances. Undoubtedly, studying at a university and especially at an art university is a special social environment for a student. The place and the peers mark and strengthen the identity process of the students, although

not as strongly as we had expected. The pedagogical ethos is seen in the students' identity photos regardless of their field of art or past experiences<sup>3</sup>.

The world becomes more visual in a breath-taking speed and pictures and the messages they carry have an even more dominant position. We are surrounded by pictures everywhere and those pictures live in our minds – some for a longer time and some for a shorter time – even though we do not pay attention to them (Kotkavirta 2009). The central mission of art education is to help us analyze this visual chaos and provide various methods to interpret the picture, to see beyond the surface. One way of analyzing is to use Peirce's theory on triadic structure.

From the viewpoint of interpreting our data, the iconic nature of the photos is especially interesting. The iconic elements seen in the photos tell us how the photographer wished to consciously construct his or her identity. The photographer has indeed carefully selected everything that is seen in the photo – how he or she has placed him- or herself in it, the type of environment chosen and the props he or she wishes to crop into the photo. When the student holds an instrument or watercolors, puts him- or herself on the stage of a theater or into a classroom, he or she tells us directly what he or she considers important for his or her identity formation. Surely, index and symbol features can be found in the identity photos. However, our interpretation withdraws from the creator of the photo and

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<sup>3</sup> We interpreted in our previous article (Pullinen & Merta 2015) the identity photos and the narratives related to the photos especially from the standpoint of being an artist and being a teacher. The data did not support our hypothesis that the inner identities of art teachers – being an artist and a teacher – would compete against each other. This is not true at least during their studies. The students seem to look for the common and supporting characteristics between being teachers and artists. Many students viewed making art and teaching as different sides of their identity which, together, create a harmonious unity. After all, the students were pedagogically oriented regardless of their art field or the extent or character of their previous education. The choice to become a teacher was an intentional one, despite the various reasons for applying to pedagogical studies. However, the reader must judge how much this is affected by the fact that the data was collected during pedagogical studies.

we cannot know for certain whether our interpretation is what the creator has intended. Therefore, it is not possible for us to conclude anything definite concerning the construction of the identity.

### Skill as a basis for art education

According to our data, we argue that the future art teachers base their teacher identities mainly on skill. This is also supported by the entrance examinations of art institutions. In the field of music and dance, the technical skills of playing, singing and dancing seem to be the starting point of all teaching. In our first article based on this data, we told a story of a dancer, in which the pedagogical study path was a consequence of an injury, when the body was no longer fit enough to handle the physically demanding work of a dancer. Sometimes, there have been doubts whether young people gravitating towards becoming visual art, theatre or music teachers are the ones that could not succeed in arts as artists, actors or musicians. The question about skill is, however, more complicated than that. Pedagogical skill can be more important for an art teacher than the artistic skill.

Based on our long-standing experience as teacher educators, we believe that passion about what one is doing is important, but the passion must come from the inside. Fanatic attitudes attract fanatic followers, but how long can the structure remain whole if the foundation is not solid? If a student throws herself passionately into her studies under the wing of an expert, what happens to the novice facing the field alone?

### Self-centredness

In one way, our data also indicate a rugged picture of the self-centredness of our time. The identity photos of future art teachers intertwine to a large extent with the personality traits of their creators, with the environments where they have grown up and with personal



hobbies. Instead, one has to search for reformers closely. In the photos, the young adults' concern for nature is not evident, neither is the societal activity nor the multicultural world.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, the nature of the assignment did not persuade them to photograph that.

The function of most photos was merely to be beautiful. One might argue that it is identity work as well, but in relation to our pedagogical goals it seems quite superficial. Many young people live in this so-called selfie-culture and are used to sharing the formerly written messages as photos: me in front of the Ducale Palace, me with my friend eating, me on the Bridge of Whispers, me in beautiful evening make-up. The photos tell us about 'me' somewhere, doing something, not necessarily anything deeper. Perhaps we didn't know how to emphasize the academic and reflective nature of the assignment. It is, of course, a different matter to tell one's story to one's own circle of friends than to two university lecturers doing research.

### Empowering identity photos

Interestingly, many photos of our data are consciously constructed even though they highlight the characteristics not necessarily found in the student, even if she or he would like them to exist. They, in some way, tried to build an ideal picture of an art teacher, as a goal to pursue later on. In this sense, the construction process of identity can be seen as a therapeutic experience.

We want to maintain a clear distinction between this and the method called *empowering photography*. For sure, as a process, identity pictures can be therapeutic, but that was not our goal in the project. Miina Savolainen developed empowering photography into a method used in social care and nursing. The basis for empowering photography – its soul, as Savolainen puts it – remains in its birthplace, i.e. in child welfare. What does a severely mistreated person need to

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<sup>4</sup> This way of thinking is not found in the essays the students wrote based on their identity photos.

become valuable, involved and connected to other people (Savolainen 2008)? The thought that a person has to be precious in someone else's eyes before they can be precious to themselves was reversed in our project; it was about a reflective process in which students evaluated their relationship to their future educational role and their expectations of becoming art teachers. Primarily, we were hoping the students would look honestly inwards, into their own mirror. Instead of empowering them, it was more about them becoming aware (see also Pienimäki 2013).

### Good enough art teacher

Our data indicate that skills are a sensitive spot for art teachers. But who is skilled enough as an art teacher? When skill is viewed as pedagogical understanding, we are close to the ethos of sufficiency, which Hannu Simola (2001) and Donald Winnicott (1981) have also discussed. Let us apply Winnicott's idea of becoming an art teacher. A good-enough teacher who is dedicated to art but also educationally aware can be a very good option for children and young people. An excessive artistic ambition can disrupt the learning and growth of young people. At its worst, the teacher's need for recognition can force their students to attempt to actualize the artistic ambitions of the teacher. It is good to remember that, in art education, the opportunity to fail is also fruitful in relation to learning. This shifts the emphasis from the end result to the process. Based on our experience, those students who emphasize their artisthood too heavily tend to become trapped in their own preconceived ideas and do not dare to open themselves up to learn something new, to truly plunge into the unknown, whereas those students who view their competence more skeptically test their limits more boldly and are curious about the world. In an inclusive environment, this type of student becomes a skilled and understanding teacher who considers guiding the pupils along their own paths to create something significant.

According to Barthes (1980), photos show death. Perhaps we want to immortalize what we would not like to see to die/disappear. The students take photos of what is close to them and perhaps even the most important to them: one's own family history, childhood environment, friends, student life and the expectations and prejudices of their own art field. Time goes on and we can never go back to what has been. Through the student's own picture he or she can go back to that moment in the future – bring history into the present. However, we as researchers, look into the future through the photos. It would be interesting to see how art educators see their art teacher identities after ten years.

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