

## The corporate curriculum: a rich landscape for knowledge productivity

By Joseph Kessels

Perceptions of education and learning in organisations are changing rapidly. The significance of knowledge, learning, and working has experienced a revolution that has gone virtually unnoticed. Contrary to the conviction that human beings represent the most important resource of an organisation, reality is that business process re-engineering focuses on improved productivity and reduced labour costs. Employees are regarded as resources as long as they contribute to the company's core competencies and knowledge productivity. This perspective has a definite impact on the ability to learn, on the educational system and on new social imbalances.

If learning is so essential for organisations, does a special plan for learning exist? The tremendous importance of learning power instigates the demand for a corporate curriculum (Kessels, 1996a). The acknowledgement that organisations operate in a knowledge economy assigns a strategic significance to knowledge productivity: the ability to acquire, create, disseminate, and apply knowledge to improve and develop new processes, products and services.

The corporate curriculum should be viewed as a rich landscape where personnel and teams find their way and construct knowledge. An organisation that tries to improve knowledge productivity will focus on the analysis and support of the following learning functions (Kessels, 1996b):

1. *Subject matter expertise*: acquiring subject matter expertise and skills related directly to the scope of the target competencies. The competencies related to acquiring subject matter expertise have been the main objective of training and development. Yet, a highly specialized work force does not make a learning organisation that becomes knowledge productive.
2. *Problem solving*: learning to solve problems by using domain specific expertise. It is important to develop competencies with which existing domain specific knowledge is applied to solving new problems. Besides reproductive skills, this requires productive skills: how to act in new and ill defined problem areas?
3. *Reflective skills and meta-cognitions*: developing reflective skills and meta-cognitions conducive to locating paths leading to new knowledge and means for acquiring and applying this asset. The main questions that we should ask ourselves here are: why is it that we are good in solving this type of problems, and why do we do so badly when factors of the type x are involved? Why is it that we are making progress in this field, but are lagging behind in adjacent domains?
4. *Communication skills*: acquiring communication skills that provide access to the knowledge network of others and that enrich the learning climate within a workplace. Knowledge productivity requires easy access to relevant sources of information and competence. Getting access to these networks relies heavily on the proficiency in communication and social skills. It is not only a matter of polite behavior. The main question here is: how do I make myself attractive in order to participate in the network of interesting knowledge workers? What can I offer and how am I accepted? Highly developed social and communication skills promote a favorable learning climate.
5. *Self regulation of motivation and affection*: acquiring skills that regulate the motivation and affections related to learning. In a traditional economy a manager could say: Joseph, work

harder, or run faster. In a knowledge economy it is useless for a manager to say: Joseph, be smarter or show more creativity! Being smart and creative depends heavily on personal interest. Questions that are important here are: Why do you get up so early to avoid the traffic jams? What is it that makes you move? What is your main drive? Why do you put so much energy in that project? Why is it that you completely neglect the work of your colleague? Affections, affinities, and emotions play an important role in knowledge work. I cannot be inventive in a domain for which I am not motivated. What is meaningful work for me and how do I become committed? Finding out what emotional and affective drives employees have and how they can regulate these will probably be an important aspect of human resource development in a knowledge economy.

6. *Harmony and stability*: promoting harmony and stability to enable specialization, synergy, cohesion, and integration. Harmony and stability are necessary for gradual improvement. How do I learn from the past and how can I apply this to my actual work? Unfortunately, many employees work in an environment that is permanently disturbed by reorganizations, redesigned business process projects, or fast moving managers. The absence of the threat of redundancy and time to reflect upon developments exploit existing (intellectual) resources, and consume these without generating new knowledge. Lack of peace and stability results in impoverishment of intellectual assets.
7. *Creative turmoil*: causing creative turmoil to instigate innovation. Creative turmoil brings the dynamics that push towards radical innovation and leaving traditional paths behind. Creative turmoil requires a certain amount of existential threat. It should really matter, to surmount or to lose. In a sense peace and stability, and creative turmoil are two contrasting learning functions. Some employees will do better in an environment that is harmonious and stable, others feel spurred by creative turmoil. Both should be seen as necessary, but in a balanced way.

The policy and the activities that an organisation develops to promote these seven learning functions form its corporate curriculum: the plan for learning to increase knowledge productivity. The knowledge productivity has an impact on organisational performance.

#### References:

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## Interview with Joseph Kessels, the founder of the "corporate curriculum"

### 1. Who invented the name "corporate curriculum"?

In 1995 I was appointed as a professor at Leiden University. It was in my inaugural lecture that I first used the name "corporate curriculum". I was searching for a concept that comprises an organisation's learning activities. Curriculum means, amongst other things, 'a plan for learning'. Also inspiring was an original Latin meaning, 'the track for horse races in ancient Rome'. Furthermore, the concept of the 'hidden curriculum' is fascinating, and worth applying to learning organisations. Finally, the oldest document in which the term curriculum is used, in the context of schooling and education, is found and kept in the library of the University of Leiden. Over 400 years ago, on February 17, 1582, to be precise, the professors of Leiden University met in the Senate Room. On this occasion Gisbertus Fredericus from Amsterdam received a title and the authority to practice medicine. The minutes of this meeting reflect that Gisbertus merited this award because he had satisfied the condition 'confecto iam studiorum suorum curriculo', meaning that he had completed his course of study. This Acta Senatus is the oldest source in our possession that uses the word curriculum in its meaning of a course of study and learning. All these elements and associations, combined with the fact that Leiden University founded the first chair of human resource development in the Netherlands, helped me to choose the term 'corporate curriculum' for the domain that I am fascinated with.

### 2. Why does the corporate curriculum consist of seven elements?

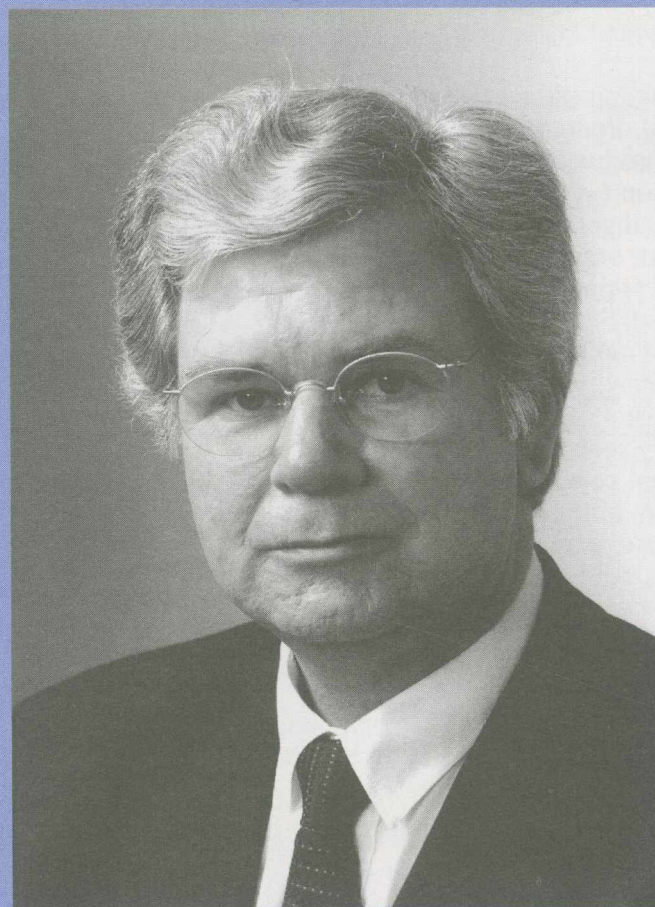
Well, seven is an attractive number. However, it is more important that the seven designated domains - subject matter expertise, problem finding and solving, reflective skills, interactive skills, self regulation, harmony & stability, and creative turmoil - cover the many types of competencies and perspectives that matter in the rich landscape that forms the learning environment of an organization. What it boils down to is that the seven learning functions encompass the critical issues of a great variety of sources of human resource development, knowledge management and the learning organisation. I have the impression that the seven elements of my concept potentially help to find answers to most questions and activities in the field of learning and knowledge productivity.

### 3. Are there firms that use the concept of the corporate curriculum?

At the moment a variety of organisations have started pilot schemes to implement the concept. Sometimes the reason is to integrate formal training and the day to day learning processes into the workplace. Sometimes it is to get a better hold of the rather vague concept of the learning organization. We also see that companies that naively started buying and building 'knowledge systems' overlooked the aspect of human competence, interest and motivation. The seven learning functions form a powerful instrument for analysis and help to integrate ICT-systems and knowledge productivity. The concept of the corporate curriculum and knowledge productivity also forms the conceptual basis for a range of research projects in Leiden. I hope very much that seminars, such as the Durham meeting, will elaborate on the descriptions of the various learning functions, so that the concept expands and becomes richer.

### 4. What about the corporate curriculum in the future?

On the basis of the many positive reactions it is my belief that many organisations and research groups will use the concept. In a way it is quite natural that, following the general ideas of the learning organisation and knowledge management, now more operational concepts - such as the corporate curriculum and knowledge productivity - are being developed. I am curious as to how they are going to integrate with the perspective of life long learning and employability.



Joseph Kessels