Effective Curriculum Planning: Approach and Success Factors

Abstract: This paper discusses the conditions under which curriculum planning and design may be undertaken, as well as some of the methodological best practices Colter Learning has adopted over the years to efficiently conduct the curriculum analysis activities that lead to successful learning programs and talent management efforts.
Effective Curriculum Planning: Approach and Success Factors

What is a “curriculum”?  
The term “curriculum” is often used interchangeably with training, courseware, and education programs. Learning professionals in an organizational setting typically mean “curriculum” to refer to an overarching learning strategy and organizational structure that, in turn, comprises any number of individual learning solutions (e.g. courses, webinars, elearning, job-aids, wikis, etc.). Done properly, a curriculum design is a validated road map for how skills and knowledge are achieved by the various learning audiences being targeted in the organization.

What a curriculum plan should define  
A completed curriculum analysis should define for the organization – including learning development teams – the following:
- Target audiences
- Core competencies
- Skill/content areas to be covered
- Instructional delivery approaches
- Specific courses and/or modules to be created/acquired
- Learning “tracks”
- Certification or achievement opportunities
- Measurement and continuous improvement approaches

Common triggers for curriculum planning  
The genesis for curriculum planning and design typically falls into one of the following contexts:
Organizations are:
- Overhauling an existing curriculum
- Creating a new curriculum where formal training hasn’t existed
- Creating a new curriculum where some training has been conducted ad hoc, semi-formally and without sufficient reasoned structure or standards behind it

Methodology  
At Colter, we use the high-level process below to drive curriculum planning efforts. Every stage of the process involves close collaboration between the learning architects and the organization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Design</th>
<th>Validation</th>
<th>Continuous improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learner profiles</td>
<td>Role-based learning tracks or paths</td>
<td>Test and confirm design ideas with:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competency mapping</td>
<td>Courses/modules per track</td>
<td>Key stakeholders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill/knowledge areas</td>
<td>High-level objectives</td>
<td>Supervisory groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor profiles</td>
<td>Sequencing &amp; timing</td>
<td>Learner groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment &amp; certification options</td>
<td>Delivery methods</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-usable assets</td>
<td>Incentive systems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum ownership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Test and confirm design ideas with:
- Key stakeholders
- Supervisory groups
- Learner groups

- Training efficacy evaluation plan
- Ongoing training improvement plan
**Keys to success**

**Start small**
Don’t do the whole organization. Tackle a high-priority role or audience and let the success and findings of that effort drive subsequent curriculum planning.

**Involve the right stakeholders**
Resist involving too many voices and any individuals known to make consensus challenging. A few representatives from these groups are ideal:

- People who really understand what the front-line, or field work, is about
- People who know the organization’s training history but aren’t necessarily its “authors” (or someone with pride in the status quo)
- People who understand the organization’s capacity to support various instructional delivery methods (e.g. classrooms, labs, virtual conferencing, LMS, etc.)
- Representatives from the audience groups

**Keep the meeting group small**
You’ll ultimately want to get input from lots of people, but you don’t necessarily need to have them all present in the initial analysis meetings. Consider restricting the initial group to 3 to 5 key people. This group can create an initial draft - a “straw dog” that the larger group can react to. It can be much more efficient to go through several drafts to reach consensus than to try to get consensus from a large group on the first draft.

**A simple job analysis, not a deep-dive task analysis**
It’s easy for the meetings and working sessions to morph from basic job analyses into detailed task analysis which is too detailed and time consuming at this stage. Keep it simple, focusing on jobs, roles and high-level skills, and be prepared to reign participants in from time to time.

**Conclusion**
Smart curriculum planning and design lays the foundation for all subsequent decisions surrounding training and performance support, and does it in a way that builds credibility and stakeholder buy-in. If you’d like to discuss your organization’s approach to curriculum planning and learning strategy, we’d love to talk with you.

Thank you for reading.

J.P Brown, PhD
Colter Learning Partners, Inc.
800-820-7280
jpbrown@colterlearning.com