Chapter X

Designing and Implementing Views on Competencies

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Abstract

In education as well as in human resource management, the concept of competency is becoming more and more important. However, competency is a fuzzy concept that lacks coherent terminology and is used in many different meanings. In the first part of this chapter, competency is defined as a multi-dimensional construct with five dimensions: specificity, coherency, durability, activity, and trainability. Then two approaches are presented to establish the competencies organisations or educational institutes should address: the function-based approach, which focuses requirements for good performance on a specific function, and the employee-based approach, which focuses on individual competencies for excellent performers. Finally, it is argued that a competency-based curriculum should move toward self-directed competency-based learning (SDCBL), using personal learning plans and adopting the flexible learning opportunities of e-learning. However, SDCBL can only be successful when learners can be taught to be responsible managers and owners of their own learning process.

Introduction

One of the ideas that has gained much attention these days is the notion of competency. There are many scholars and practitioners claiming that competency serves as a strong impetus to improve human resource management and education, in particular vocational and professional education. In addition to this, there is a strong belief that e-learning will contribute to the fast and broad adoption of competency-based practices in organisations and education.

In this chapter, we start exploring the notion of competency, and we argue that this concept is, in fact, too fuzzy. Competency is a rather controversial concept: It lacks a coherent terminology and therefore it is unclear what it actually means. To improve the application of the concept of competency, we present a framework to define competency more precisely.

After exploring the concept of competency, we provide two dominant perceptions of competency-based learning that are grounded in two different contexts. First, we will elaborate on competency-based learning in organisations, followed by a discussion about the application of the concept of competency in education.

What becomes clear from these descriptions of applications of competency-based practices is that competency-based learning differs from more traditional practices. However, for the near future we expect that new types of competency-based learning will emerge. In the last part of this chapter, we claim that mainstream competency-based learning (MCBL) will move toward what we define as self-directed competency-based learning. We will compare traditional education to MCBL and SDCBL. The chapter ends with some remarks for discussion.

The Triumph of a Fuzzy Concept

There are several motives and circumstances that contribute to the contemporary prominent status of the concept of competencies. This section lists the utmost important factors, followed by an overview of the various views on competencies.

The concept of competency refers to personal competencies as well as corporate competencies. Personal competencies consist of experience, skills and abilities of an individual. Corporate competencies consist of skills and expertise that belong to the organisation itself; they are embedded in company processes, and they tend to remain in the organisation even when individuals leave. They consist basically of routines, knowledge, and behaviour (Nelson & Winter, 1982). Kessels (2004) describes the core competencies of organisations as the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that add the main value to a product or service, distinguish the organisation in competition with others, and can be applied by the organisation to new product fields and services. The focus in this chapter, however, is not on organisational but on personal competencies.

Van der Klink and Boon (2003) and Delamare Le Deist and Winterton (2005), among others, investigated causes and motives underlying the adoption of the concept of competencies. Table 1 lists the most powerful factors. As well in organisations as in education (vocational

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