

OFF SCRIPT

HUMAN CAPITAL, SCRIPTED CURRICULUM, AND LEADERSHIP AT THE EDGE OF CONTROL

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In contemporary educational systems, scripted curriculum has emerged as a dominant mechanism for ensuring consistency, accountability, and alignment with institutional and external demands (Au, 2007; Timberlake et al., 2017). Within higher education, these logics increasingly intersect with human capital strategies, where faculty are conceptualized not only as educators but as organizational assets whose performance can be optimized, measured, and aligned with strategic goals. These approaches promise efficiency and equity; they also risk reducing teaching and learning to procedural enactments.

I sit with this tension. As a senior human capital leader in higher education, I participate in designing systems that shape faculty work, recruitment, evaluation, development, and performance expectations. At the same time, I remain a product of educational experiences deeply structured by discipline, predictability, and compliance. These dual positionalities—architect and subject—form the basis of this inquiry. How do leaders make sense of and navigate scripted curriculum as both a strategic tool and a lived constraint?

To explore this question, rather than presenting a linear argument, I assemble a *currere*-oriented set of curriculum fragments depicting the past, present, and imagined future that reveal how scripting operates across time, space, and identity. These fragments are not illustrative; they are constitutive. They function as sites of meaning-making through which broader theoretical and organizational questions emerge.

Human capital theory positions individuals as assets whose skills, knowledge, and abilities contribute to organizational performance. In educational contexts, this perspective has increasingly informed policies related to teacher effectiveness, accountability, and curriculum standardization (Au, 2007). Scripted curricula, in particular, are often justified as mechanisms for reducing variability and ensuring consistent instructional quality (Golann, 2021; Vaughn et al., 2022). However, scholars have critiqued these approaches for constraining teacher agency and undermining democratic and relational dimensions of education (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Powell et al., 2017). From a leadership perspective, this raises critical questions: How do institutional strategies shape professional identity? What is gained through standardization, and what is lost?

While growing up, my house woke before the sun. At 0500 my father flipped on the hallway light. Three knocks. Always three. “Up.” Not loud. Not angry. Final.

We were in World War II-era military housing. The floor was cold when my feet touched it. I folded my sheets tight, corners tucked, hospital style, pulling the fabric smooth until it looked like it hadn’t been slept in. If a wrinkle showed, he would press his palm flat against it and say, “Again.”

The kitchen smelled like coffee and starch. My mother ironed shirts at the counter while a small black and white TV muttered the weather. We ate without talking. Toast. Eggs. Plates set down quietly. Chairs pushed in straight.

There was a schedule taped to the refrigerator: wake, dress, breakfast, school, homework, chores, lights out. Each line in block letters. Each box checked with a pen. My name written at the top like a heading. After school, backpacks on the hook. No television. Homework at the table. “Show your work,” he said, tapping the paper. If I finished early, I copied vocabulary words or practiced handwriting. The pencil pressed hard enough to leave grooves in the next page.

At night, we were required to read for 30 minutes before lights out—only classics. After reading, I lay in bed listening for the hallway light, even though it wouldn’t come until morning. My chest felt tight, like I’d forgotten something important. Sometimes, I rehearsed the next day in my head, math worksheet, spelling quiz, dishes, laundry, so I wouldn’t miss a step.

When the alarm rang, I was already awake.

I was six.

I decided on a military academy when I was in the 4th grade. It felt obvious. If everything already ran like this, lines, rules, inspection, then I might as well choose the place that did it best. The brochure showed cadets in crisp uniforms standing at attention, faces forward, medals catching the sun. Brick buildings. Flags. Order.

“You sure?” “Yes, sir.” He nodded once. Approval landed like a stamp.

From then on, it became the plan. Push-ups before breakfast. Running laps at the track. Timed. “Again,” he said if I slowed. My lungs burned in the cold air. Gravel snapped under my shoes. I counted breaths to keep going. Applications. Physicals. Hair cut shorter than I liked. Everything narrowed toward one date circled in red—to one moment in time—Reporting Day.

The bus dropped us at the gate just after dawn, August heat already rising off the pavement. Parents stood clustered with duffel bags and cardboard boxes. People talked too loudly, laughing the way they do when they’re nervous. A cadet with a shaved head and mirrored sunglasses shouted, “Form two lines! Families left, Cadets right!” The word Cadets sounded heavier than my name.

The line moved. A clipboard. A tag pinned to my chest. My last name in thick marker. I could hear boots striking concrete somewhere, steady and sharp. Inside the building the air was cold and chemical. Fluorescent lights humming. Thick white walls. “Dump your bags on the table. Everything out. Everything.” Clothes, socks, photos, the small stuffed dog I’d packed without thinking. A cadet held it up between two fingers. “You won’t need this.” He dropped it into a bin without looking at me. My face went hot. I swallowed. “Next station!”

Haircut. Buzz. Long dark hair sliding down the cape and onto the floor. I watched strands gather around my shoes. Uniform issue. “Size?” “Stand straight.” “Arms out.” Fabric stiff against my skin. The name tape sewn on before I even wore it. By afternoon we stood in a square outside, sun overhead, sweat sliding down my back. “Eyes forward!” someone barked. My neck ached from holding still. A girl next to me whispered, “Is it always like this?” “Silence in the ranks!” We stared ahead.

Commands came one after another. Left face. Right face. About face. March. Halt. Repeat. If someone missed a beat, we all started over. “Again!” Boots scraped in unison. Dust lifted. My throat tasted like metal. Dinner in the mess hall. Trays clattering, voices clipped. “Sit.” “Eat.” We had seven minutes. I shoveled food in, barely tasting it. My hands shook.

That night, the beds were lined up perfectly, blankets folded the same way I’d done at home. Corners tight. Hospital style. “Lights out!” a voice called. I lay on my back listening to the

silence. My scalp prickled where the hair was gone. My muscles buzzed, like they were still marching. I thought about the stuffed dog in the bin. The way the cadet didn't look at me. I wasn't allowed to read. My chest felt the same tightness as it had years before, waiting for the hallway light. Darkness dropped all at once.

Tomorrow's schedule was taped to my locker: 0500 reveille. Formation. Drill. Classes. Drill. Study. Lights out. Each line already decided. I closed my eyes and pictured the morning: the shout, the rush, the straight lines. I tried to memorize it so I wouldn't get anything wrong. Sleep came slowly, like stepping into cold water.

It was not called curriculum.
But time was organized.
Behavior corrected.
Outcomes anticipated.

A totalizing structure without naming itself as such.

Later, I will learn and understand that curriculum is not only what is written but what is lived (Pinar, 2006), what presses into the body until it feels like instinct. My early experiences were a totalizing structure, one in which time, behavior, and expectations were tightly controlled. My home functioned as a curriculum. Objectives were implicit but clear: discipline, efficiency, compliance. Assessment was constant. Deviation was corrected.

What is striking is not only the rigidity of the structure but its internalization. I learned to anticipate expectations, to minimize error, to perform competence on demand. This learning mirrors what Au (2007) describes in high-stakes educational environments, where control over curriculum translates into control over behavior. The result is a form of embodied compliance, one that extends beyond schooling into identity.

The academy intensified this scripting. Again! Scripting is collective. Individual variance becomes a liability for the group. Efficiency is achieved through uniformity. This experience reflects what Golann (2021) identifies in "no-excuses" schooling models, where strict behavioral and instructional scripts produce measurable outcomes while constraining autonomy. Meanwhile, within this system, there is success. Achievement. Recognition. This complicates critique. Scripted environments do not simply oppress; they also produce competence. They reward alignment. They shape individuals who can function effectively within structured systems.

I did not choose structure.
I was shaped toward it.
And later –
I would call that preference.
Competence.
Leadership.

It informs how I interpret organizational effectiveness and leadership.

I contemplate my future. An email arrives at 5:12 a.m., the subject reads Human Capital Optimization Review – 8:00 a.m. Mandatory Sync. I am the Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer, but the dashboard calls me something else now: Strategic Talent Asset Lead

(Level IV). Titles have been streamlined to align with an Institutional Productivity Grid after the University partnered with a global firm to implement a Comprehensive Scripted Curriculum Model.

The campus is quiet, but not silent. Screens hum. Hallway monitors flicker with live metrics: Faculty Output Efficiency, Student Retention Predictive Index, Instructional Alignment Scores. Green is good. Yellow signals deviation. Red means intervention. I swipe my badge. The wall greets me. “Good morning, Jessica. Yesterday’s faculty micro-credential completion rate: 94.3%. Two deviations in the College of Liberal Arts. Recommended action script available.”

Curriculum is no longer designed; it is choreographed. Every syllabus has been integrated into the algorithm. Faculty receive instructional scripts through their wearable devices: objectives, prompts, examples, timing cues. Even “spontaneous discussion” moments are pre-structured to ensure that measurable competencies are met within timed increments. I remember when curriculum conversations used to be messy, human, argumentative. Now they unfold in dashboards.

I sit in the glass-walled Strategy Hub. The agenda is simple: align human capital inputs with curricular outputs. A slide appears, titled Projected Risk: Faculty Autonomy Variance increasing by 3.7%. The Provost looks to me. “Jessica, we need tighter recruitment filters. Our last cohort of hires shows elevated improvisational tendencies.” In the past, I would have called that creativity. Now it is risk. A hologram representative from our global firm flickers. “Script adherence correlates with a 12% increase in student credential attainment. Human capital variability must be reduced to maintain competitive positioning.” I glance at the scores on the screen. I know these people. I recruited them. I convinced them that this institution valued transformative leadership, culturally responsive practice, distributed authority. I told them they would shape the curriculum. Now the curriculum shapes them.

Later, I visit a seminar. The Professor stands at the front of the room. Her contact lens projects the day’s instructional prompts. A timer glows in her peripheral vision. “Ask students to reflect on ethical implications of AI in leadership. Allow 90 seconds per student. Redirect conversation if deviation exceeds 15% from competency objective.” A student raises her hand. “What if leadership isn’t about optimization? What if it’s about care?” The timer flashes yellow. The Professor hesitates. She looks at me and then back at the student. “Let’s stay with that,” she says, turning off the lens feed. Red alert. My watch vibrates. Deviation detected. I do nothing.

The room shifts. Students lean forward. Their voices overlap. The conversation spills into uncertainty about power, about labor, about who benefits from efficiency. I feel exhilaration and dread. Because what is at stake is not merely compliance. It is funding. The University’s bond rating is tied to performance metrics. Donors demand predictive returns. State appropriations depend on workforce placement statistics generated by the very scripts that constrain this moment. My role, my contribution, has been to ensure alignment. I have refined recruitment pipelines to privilege adaptability to systems. I redesigned performance evaluations to weight script fidelity. I implemented professional development modules titled, “Optimizing Instructional Consistency.” Watching the professor step outside the choreography, I sense the cost of my competence.

That evening, I open the Human Capital Strategy Portal from home. A policy draft waits for my approval: Faculty Standardization Phase II. It proposes biometric monitoring during instruction to ensure affective neutrality and pacing precision. I imagine the future. Students graduate with impeccable transcripts, every competency achieved, every learning outcome documented. Employers praise their consistency. They are efficient, adaptable, and measurable.

But no one remembers a class that changed them. No one describes a professor who lingered. No one recalls a conversation that derailed the schedule but altered a life.

A fragile alternative, I convene a different meeting. Not in the Strategy Hub, but in a circle. Faculty, students, trustees. No holograms. No dashboards. I bring data but as one voice among many. I propose a shift from optimization to cultivation. Human capital becomes human capacity. Metrics remain, but they are not masters. Scripts become guides, not mandates. Recruitment values improvisation alongside alignment. Professional development centers reflective inquiry, not compliance training. The algorithm still runs in the background, but it does not interrupt. Performance reviews include a new category: Relational Impact. The bond rating agencies question me. Donors express concern. There is risk. But faculty retention stabilizes, not because the teachers are monitored, but because they feel seen. Students report not only job placement but purpose. This alternative is messier. Outcomes fluctuate. Conversations run long. It feels slower. It feels human.

What am I contributing? In one aspect, I am the architect of elegant constraint. In another, I am the disruptor who reintroduces uncertainty. What is at stake? Not merely efficiency or reputation, but the very meaning of education. The system pings. Decision required. I close the portal without responding. Tomorrow, the dashboards will still glow. The scripts will still download. The choreography will continue. Again. But somewhere inside the system, a 15-minute unscripted conversation is now logged as an anomaly—a splinter. This is not entirely imagined. It extends what is already here. Just ... further ... until scripting becomes total.

Curriculum no longer being designed but instead choreographed, faculty receiving scripts through wearables—this future is not purely fictional. It extrapolates from existing trends: data analytics, performance metrics, and algorithmic decision-making. In this extrapolation, scripting becomes total. It integrates curriculum, faculty behavior, and institutional strategy.

Faculty Output Efficiency.
Instructional Alignment Scores.
Autonomy Variance.

The language is precise.
Clean.

It is called human capital.
But it does not sound human.

In this system, variability is risk. Creativity becomes improvisational tendency. Recruitment, evaluation, and professional growth and development are aligned to minimize deviation. This reflects a managerial logic where consistency is equated with quality. Still, a moment of disruption occurs. A professor turns off the feed. I understand what scripted systems cannot fully contain: relationality, curiosity, unpredictability. It also exposes the cost of optimization; no one remembers a class that changed them. This critique aligns with Love's (2020) argument that education must extend beyond survival and efficiency toward liberation and meaning. It also resonates with Fitz and Nikolaidis's (2020) democratic critique, which positions scripted curriculum as limiting participatory and transformative possibilities. From a leadership perspective, the future raises a central tension: optimization produces measurable outcomes but may erode the very conditions that make education meaningful.

Now—
the present.

In the classroom. The room is warm. Radiator heat clicks, a dull metallic rhythm. Someone cracked a window despite the cold. Papers rustle. Laptops glow. Coffee smells burnt. We are discussing curriculum theory, but the conversation drifts toward schooling as lived experience, not policy, not frameworks: memory. I have my thoughts in front of me, the past on the left, the future on the right, like bookends of the present. The pages feel heavier than they should.

The professor asks, “What is the nature of your educational experience?” I answer internally, physically. My spine straightens. Feet plant. Shoulders square. Structured. Predictable. Evaluative. Scripted. The word lands with recognition, not discovery. My history reads less like family story and more like curricular design. Objectives defined. Time enforced. Assessment constant. Deviation corrected. Compliance mistaken for success. My father was not trying to produce a curriculum, but he did. A total one. Hidden, domestic, absolute.

And I excelled in it. That is the part that unsettles me most, not the severity, not the fear, but the efficiency. I learned to anticipate expectations, to minimize error, to perform competence on demand. Teachers praised me as disciplined, focused, mature. I finished early. I followed directions. I never disrupted the pacing of the lesson. I was “on task.” Again.

The radiator clicks. A student laughs unrelated to the discussion, and the sound feels transgressive. I realize how the idea of schooling as controlled space has settled into my nervous system. The professor asks how this impacts our educational journey. I look toward my anticipated future. I wrote it as speculative fiction, but it reads less like fantasy and more like extrapolation. I have seen that world, in strategic plans, accreditation demands, funding formulas, predictive analytics dashboards, workload models. None of them call themselves scripts. All of them function as such.

Meanwhile, I translate priorities into hiring profiles, evaluation criteria, development programs. I shape who will write syllabi and under what constraints. That realization sits in my chest with weight. The professor says something about curriculum as a lived relation between teacher, student, and subject. What I have witnessed complicates that relational vision. Teachers become implementers rather than intellectuals. Students become recipients rather than participants. Variance becomes failure. Nonetheless, these systems promise equity through consistency, quality through standardization, accountability through visibility. They are designed to protect against the unpredictability of human teaching. But unpredictability is precisely where learning lives.

A classmate tells of a teacher who abandoned a lesson plan to discuss a poem that spoke to her grief. The room softens. Heads nod. I feel something loosen in my chest, followed almost immediately by anxiety, as if unscripted moments require justification. This is the condition of my educational journey—tension between two internalized logics. One insists that structure produces safety, achievement, and legitimacy. The other recognizes that over-structure suffocates meaning.

The pedagogies attached to my experiences have trained me to be an efficient learner but not a free one. I know how to decode expectations and produce responses. What takes effort is risk: asking questions that derail the trajectory, admit uncertainty, and tolerate ambiguity. Even in a doctoral seminar designed for inquiry, I cherish the rubric. The irony is that this very sensitivity makes me effective in leadership roles. I anticipate institutional pressures and align people with strategic goals. I translate human complexity into administratively legible categories.

In human capital language, this is competence.

In curriculum language—
it may also be complicity.

I think of the future scenario's unscripted classroom moment—the professor turning off the feed. I imagined myself as observer, maybe even ally. Sitting here, I am less certain. Would I intervene? Would I protect the system that sustains the institution or the relational space that sustains education? The question feels diagnostic. My educational experience has been formed by powerful structures that rewarded compliance and punished deviation, moving me into positions where I help design those very structures. It is also one of gradually encountering moments that resist scripting, that bare education as encounter rather than execution. My journey has made me both architect and critic of systems that standardize learning. It has given me tools to navigate institutions while simultaneously raising doubts about what those tools cost. It has delayed, but not extinguished, my capacity for curiosity. Most importantly, it has made me aware that curriculum is not only what is written in guides or delivered in classrooms. It is what shapes bodies, emotions, expectations, and identities over time. The hidden curriculum of obedience can be as powerful as any syllabus.

Class ends. Chairs scrape. Screens close. I remain seated. My two pieces lie side by side. The past explains how scripting became normal. The future warns what happens if it becomes absolute. The present is where interpretation occurs, where I decide to reproduce those patterns or interrupt them. In the hall, students talk—animated, unsynchronized, alive. No timer regulates the conversation. No objective is posted. No one is worried about alignment. I notice that my shoulders have dropped. My steps are not perfectly measured. I am not rehearsing the next task.

Education is not simply what prepared me to function efficiently within systems. It is also what allows me to question those systems, to imagine alternatives, to tolerate messiness without interpreting it as failure. If the past is discipline and the future is optimization, then this moment, walking down a noisy hallway with papers in my arms and uncertainty in my mind, is something else entirely. Possibility.

My past and future have converged. Scripted curriculum is no longer abstract; it is embodied and enacted. The realization is unsettling. The duality of competence versus complicity defines my leadership position. I translate institutional priorities into systems that shape faculty work. I design structures that align behavior with strategy. These actions are valued within organizational contexts. They are indicators of effectiveness. Yet, they also contribute to the standardization of academic work. I find two competing logics: structure as safety and legitimacy and structure as constraint and loss of meaning. These logics are not easily reconciled. They coexist. They shape decision-making.

Leadership is said to be distributed (Spillane, 2006).

Stretched across people.
Across situations.

But here, distribution does not feel like agency.

It feels like diffusion of responsibility.

Control, embedded everywhere—
so no one has to name it.

In this context, scripting redistributes authority, not by empowering individuals, but by embedding control within structures.

Transformational leadership asks for vision.
For inspiration.
For movement. (Leithwood & Sun, 2012)

But scripts leave little room for either.

What happens to transformation
when deviation is flagged as risk?

The insight is not resolution but recognition: leadership operates within constraints that are both enabling and limiting.

The moment seeks reconstruction. What might it mean to lead differently within these constraints? The possibility offers a tentative alternative—the shift I propose from optimization to cultivation, where human capital becomes human capacity, reframes faculty not as assets to be optimized but as individuals to be developed. It does not reject structure entirely. Instead, it repositions scripts as guides rather than mandates. This aligns with Vaughn et al.'s (2022) calls for adaptive teaching, where educators respond dynamically to context. It also reflects a more relational understanding of leadership, where meaning-making is central.

This approach to human capital leadership forces me to lead with awareness of my own complicity and confront how I lead. Balancing alignment and autonomy forces me to recognize the need for consistency while preserving space for professional judgment. Redefining metrics requires me to incorporate relational and qualitative dimensions of teaching. Centering reflective practice compels me to use different methods to interrogate assumptions and decisions. Valuing variability challenges me to understand difference as a source of innovation rather than risk. These four approaches are not without challenges. Institutional pressures, funding, accountability, and competition continue to demand measurable outcomes. Leaders must navigate these realities while resisting totalizing control. The goal is not to eliminate tension but to work within it.

Leadership decisions are shaped by personal histories, institutional logics, and imagined futures. Scripted curriculum operates across scales. It is not confined to classrooms; it extends into homes, organizations, and systems. It shapes behavior, identity, and expectations. Human capital strategies both enable and constrain. They provide structure and alignment but may limit agency and creativity. Reflective practice is essential for leadership, examining how leaders participate in and potentially disrupt these systems.

Scripted curriculum, viewed through a human capital lens, is both a strategic tool and a lived constraint. It offers efficiency, consistency, and alignment. It also risks reducing education to performance and compliance. Effective leadership in this context requires not only technical competence but reflective awareness.



There is no final decision.

No clean resolution
where structure gives way to freedom
or freedom replaces structure.

Only this—

a series of moments.

A professor turning off a lens.
A student asking a question that does not fit.
A leader choosing not to intervene.

The tension returns to me.

Again.

And again.

The script is still there.

But so am I.

And I do not have to follow it
all the way through.

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