

## Book Review / Compte rendu

**Dunn, Mary Ellen (2015). *Reclaiming opportunities for effective teaching: An institutional ethnographic study of community college course outlines*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. Pages: 153. Price: \$102.96 CDN (hardcover).**

Reviewed by Lydia Boyko, Ph.D., APR, FLMI, Professor, Humber College Institute of Technology & Advanced Learning

The genesis of this book is a doctoral thesis focused on the standardization of Ontario community college teaching through an examination of course outlines. The study, an institutional ethnography, was conducted 2006-2010 exclusively with teachers (both new to and experienced with course outlines), at two Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs), across four academic semesters, and involving text analysis related to union negotiations as they influence course outline workload.

Author Mary Ellen Dunn is upfront stating this is “a harsh critique of the use of course outlines” although they are not “inherently bad” (Dunn, 2015, p. xvi). Her foundational observation is that systematizing course outlines across programs and institutions effectively devalues, commoditizes and impersonalizes post-secondary education, aligned with privatization, profit-leaning motives. Professors are losing control of their freedom to develop curriculum and assessment as managers require faculty to follow prescribed processes and monitor compliance with the ordered standards. Professors are experiencing more work at a faster pace, with a decline in opportunities to use their professional judgment to address the needs of their students.

When forced upon faculty, who are not always involved in their development, course outlines “become ideological texts” and “instruments of oppression” (Dunn, 2015, xvi). They also conflict with the academic employees’ collective agreement, which calls for college faculty to foster an effective learning environment for students. On the flip side, the agreement does not address how managers are expected to cultivate an equally effective teaching environment for faculty (Dunn, 2015, p. 55).

As a full-time professor at a major Ontario college, with prior experience at another large college as a partial-load instructor for a cumulative 13 years, I have direct and extensive knowledge of this subject although not every aspect covered (notably, Workload

Preference Listings and Course Picks Lists). While this review is meant to provide an unbiased overview and assessment of the author's research methodology, comments and conclusions, I can attest to the advantages and disadvantages associated with course outlines and their impact on academic freedom, teaching and learning. (Ironically but not coincidentally, one research informant identified throughout the text is also named Lydia, interviewed at Humberview. Moreover, I reside in this area of Toronto and work at an institution with a similar name. However, I hereby confirm that the named "Lydia" is not me nor does she reflect my experiences.)

Written in a solidly academic style reflecting a dissertation, the book is thematically structured, starting with a sample course outline presented alongside excerpts from participant interviews, followed by a review of the macro setting for teaching, then micro processes and procedures anchored in labour relations dictates that are highly prescriptive. The writing is clear. The attendant illustrations, charts and graphs are relevant and appropriately placed to corroborate key arguments.

The second chapter takes a large-scale view, mapping the ideological setting for course outlines. The discussion features various theories anchored in a business orientation, notably, human capital, human resource management and economic growth theories. The author reviews the college funding formula, student recruitment marketing tactics, strategic enrolment targets and college application forms. She notes that in today's post-secondary environment, colleges are behaving like a business competing with and against each other for students and funding that is based on student enrolment numbers. In this environment, college marketing campaigns promote institutions, programs and careers, not faculty and their individual expertise and real learning. Knowledge is objectified. Integral to this business-based focus are the government-mandated learning outcomes that include the generic Essential Employability Skills, Core Competencies and Vocational Outcomes.

The third chapter uses an organizational lens to review college administration of faculty work, including the semester calendar, class scheduling and course preparation. The calendar in particular serves to "objectify the work that faculty do" (Dunn, 2015, p. 50).

The fourth chapter features faculty work processes, including the ubiquitous Standard Workload Form (SWF), the Workload Preference Listing, the faculty Course Picks List, textbook order forms and faculty timetables. A dominant theme is the erosion of equity and continuity of teaching with construction of hierarchies in teaching/learning conditions in a "web of ruling relations" (Dunn, 2015, p. xxix) and a "web of boundaries" (p. 83) that limit teachers' creativity and flexibility to respond to learners' needs.

Chapter five adds the student dimension to the discussion as a contract between the institution and the customer (the student). In this discussion, the course outline becomes "a ruling text rather than a guideline for learning" (p. 93). The author also argues it increases students' opportunities to cheat as the curriculum and evaluations tend to be fixed over time. Meanwhile, it suppresses diversity and opportunities for differentiated learning. Ultimately, the course outline is a tool that serves to isolate faculty from students, from their own background and teaching style, and from relevant local and current events.

The next chapter presents union documents and negotiation materials that facilitate the standardization and restrict college professors' work.

In the conclusion, the author points out how market economics, which rule post-secondary education today, tends to foster educational failures and to power ruling re-

relationships within the institutions, subordinating educators to the control of managers. The course outline is a tool to reinforce marketplace imperatives, imposing teaching fragmented into outcomes.

The author points to further research that, to balance the faculty views, needs to be done from the standpoints of students, parents, administrators, quality assessment administrators, support staff and corporate leaders, in Canada and abroad.

As the author acknowledges, the focus is one sided given the methodology. A useful additional comparative would be all 24 colleges in Ontario and public colleges in other provinces. A review of university course outlines as a point of comparison and contrast would also be useful to understand the direction of post-secondary education in the context of government legislation and regulation, certainly as universities are increasingly taking on college-type characteristics of preparing students to be career ready, and colleges are offering university-level degree programs as polytechnics.

While I agree with some of the criticisms that Dunn levels against course outlines, as a professor who develops and works with course outlines on a daily basis, I am partial to the discipline they offer the teacher and the learner through their structure and consistency. Moreover, they provide the necessary details for evaluation of academic knowledge through the learning outcomes, curriculum, readings and assessments, as students move along the post-secondary education continuum, across programs and institutions and up the academic ladder. Course outlines are also essential for regulators to monitor and to control quality as they struggle to divide limited funds across the institutions.

The commoditization and commercialization of higher education in Canada and abroad has been well documented in the literature. This book (available in hardcover or electronic format) offers a unique alternative view through the course outline lens. It is a worthwhile addition to the dynamic body of knowledge on the scholarship of teaching and learning. 🍁