

Since receiving a Canadian Institutes for Health Research New Investigator Award in 2014, **Dr. Meredith Chivers'** classroom undergraduate teaching has focused on her 4th year undergraduate seminar, *Sexuality and Gender*.

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Creating an academic space where people discuss and challenge the status quo in sexuality and gender science

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By Queen's Psychology

In May 2019, **Dr. Meredith Chivers** was awarded the Undergraduate Teaching Award for the 2018/19 academic year. Since receiving a Canadian Institutes for Health Research New Investigator Award in 2014, Dr. Chivers' classroom undergraduate teaching has focused on her 4th year undergraduate seminar, *Sexuality and Gender*. In this seminar, students keen to learn about sexual and gender diversity gather to critically evaluate the science of gender/sex through a feminist science lens. For many students, this is their first experience of professional discussion of sexuality and gender/sex in a classroom setting.

“This course has evolved significantly over the 10 years I’ve been teaching at Queen’s, reflecting my own academic development and critical engagement with the research on gender/sex and sexuality. When I first came to Queen’s, I was far less critical of the status quo interpretation of sexuality science. Years of difficult experiences with knowledge translation, both within the academic community, and with the general public through popular media, taught me that myths, stereotypes, patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and other biases deeply influence the science and the ways in which the science is disseminated. This realization has transformed my approach to doing the science, and to teaching this course. I want my students to leave this class not only literate in the current research on sexuality and gender, but ready to question research more broadly and deeply. I think many students might be hesitant about being critical of

psychological research, for fear of “not getting it right”. In my classroom, I coach students in developing the intellectual skills and confidence to think critically and independently.”

Assignments in the class have included creating or editing Wikipedia pages discussing sexuality and gender/sex topics, with the aim of updating the science and reducing bias, and critically evaluating media coverage of sexuality and gender/sex research. Guest speakers -- the scientists doing the research that students are reading – have made appearances by Skype, giving students a chance to directly engage with the researcher themselves. “This was a very deliberate action on my part, to demystify the people behind the science, and to destabilize the power that the scientists are typically seen to hold in academia by giving students direct access to those who are doing the work”, said Chivers. “I think speaking directly to a scientist could be intimidating – I know I would have been intimidated as an undergrad! – but I wanted students to challenge the cultural notions that, by dint of their junior career stage, they cannot have valuable discourse with a scientist or don’t have valid questions about the science. Frankly, their questions are fantastic and the discussions that ensue have significant depth and nuance!”

Students nominating Chivers for the award commented on the class atmosphere and breadth of content. One student wrote, “I have never learned so much in a class and felt so safe in a class that talks about issues that are so controversial. Sexuality and gender are not only nuanced and idiosyncratic identities and topics, it is extremely difficult to teach and to have everyone engage in the material. Meredith not only made it interesting for everyone but made us motivated to learn beyond the current literature that is ciscentric, heterocentric, Eurocentric, ablebodycentric, and rich.”

As an out queer woman scientist, Dr. Chivers recognizes the importance of representation of sexual and gender minorities in STEM, and in academia more generally. “In the past, I didn’t feel comfortable sharing much about my personal life with my students, or being out at Queen’s. In 2016, after a discussion with a queer colleague about the need for representation, and the potential for positive impact on queer and questioning students, I outed myself in an interview for the [Walrus](#) magazine, and began describing my social location as a queer cis woman in my classes and lab.” For Chivers, creating an academic space where diverse people can gather, discuss, and challenge the status quo in sexuality and gender science has been among the most rewarding aspects of her career.