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Chris Bowie credits guest speakers with positive impact on students

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Dr. Chris Bowie was recently awarded the undergraduate teaching award for his efforts to educate and demystify mental illness at Queen's. His lectures to nearly 500 students in a second year course and a fourth year seminar have earned him a reputation of being able to bridge the complexity of the causes of mental disorders to an understanding of how these conditions are experienced by the individual, their family, and society. After arriving at Queen's 10 years ago from a research position at a medical school in New York, Dr. Bowie did not envision the direction his teaching career would take. "In New York, my work was nearly 100% focused on research. I was able to squeeze in time to teach statistics, behaviour therapy, and neuropsychology to medical students in a few lectures, but I never had the opportunity to recognize the value of knowledge translation at the scale I see now. The science we do that examines the causes and potential treatments for cognitive impairment in severe mental illness was, and remains, foundationally important to my career, but teaching at the undergraduate level has opened my eyes to how I can address, to a larger audience, how misunderstood mental illnesses are, even among a generation of students who are such strong advocates."

Bowie's nomination noted that he demonstrated an ability to communicate complex and sensitive topics with passion and with excitement for opportunities for discovery. He helps the class understand how topics that often seem beyond understanding, including psychosis and dissociative identity disorder, can best be understood by thinking of symptoms as an extension of typical human behaviour. Bowie notes: "I try to frame each course, and each class, as an opportunity to engage students to think about what drives human behaviour, not just mental illness. When we start from the foundation of what we know from research in developmental, social, and cognitive psychology, we are better positioned to be able to appreciate how clinical psychology can be an applied psychological science that focuses on discovery of causes, prevention of illness, and treatment of illness".

What stood out most clearly to his nominators, though, was his integration of guest speakers with lived experience into the learning environment. Indeed, his work with a guest speaker a few years ago led to his initiative to lead a course name change from “Abnormal Psychology” to “Clinical Psychology”. Says Bowie: “I’d always started this class noting how the textbook had an odd name because mental health issues are more common than they are abnormal. The real impact of this linguistic tool for teaching only became a semantic reality when someone with schizophrenia told me how surprised he was when a co-worker, who had been in my class, told him he saw the presenter give a talk in ‘Abnormal Psychology’. When the presenter asked me why I would call the course ‘Abnormal Psychology’, I thought it was the perfect reason to make a motion to destigmatize the course with a name change”.

In the past 10 years, Dr. Bowie has had dozens of speakers join him for guest lectures. Mental health advocate Ellie McCormack has spoken about her mental health issues in Dr. Bowie’s guest lectures and shares that “Speaking publicly motivates me to continue on my pathway to recovery and to erase stigma. I do this because I want the students to be able to learn about mental illnesses just as they would physical illnesses – and the only way to do that is to talk about it.” Christopher Foster has been such a regular guest lecturer in Dr. Bowie’s classes that he now attends each class of the 4th year seminar on psychosis to provide the experiential anecdotes that complement Dr. Bowie’s clinical and research experiences. Christopher noted in his very first lecture to over 400 students four years ago: “I stand before you trembling with nervousness as I am now speaking to more people at one time than I have in the entire 10 years I have had schizophrenia.” During his talks, Christopher, an accomplished published writer, often reads three of his poems that mark periods of his life before, during, and after his most marked experiences with the condition. Christopher notes: “My talks at Queen’s have changed my life. I went from being a hermit to confidence to speak to four or four-hundred. Speaking to students has rejuvenated my love of education. Schizophrenia took that away from me but now I feel empowered to go back to school – something I never thought possible”. Victoria Preston-Walker, who was once a student in the front row of Dr. Bowie’s class, is now a guest speaker herself. “I have a desire to help others while at the same time getting ahold of my own fears. This shouldn’t be something we worry about. Since my presentations, a lot of people personally message me – they thank me for speaking, congratulate me for my courage, and also ask me for help and advice.”

Bowie notes: “I recognize that it is a privilege to teach these courses not only because I am able to directly appeal to the few who will end up doing science and practice in this field, but because I am able to shift the way a substantially larger number of students who will be forced to suddenly recognize what mental illness looks like in their own lives or those of their peers, loved ones, and co-workers. I work hard on my slides and lecture notes, but without the generosity of our guest speakers, we would not have close to the same impact on both groups of students.”