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TEACHER TALK

Speak Up! How this teacher taught 3,000 students the art of public speaking

It is often said that “people fear public speaking more than death,” but not Sumana Chatterjee, Director – Communications and International Programmes at GEMS Modern Academy.

Sumana is an award-winning communication coach who has trained thousands of students and teachers to embrace public speaking, and pick up scores of awards for it too. She won the Women Icon- Achiever of the Decade Award for Excellence in Coaching 2022 and Education, and here she shares her tips on leading a communications curriculum.



GMA's Sumana Chatterjee

What inspired your passion for public speaking?

I hail from a family of academicians and scholars from diverse domains, and since childhood I have been privy to many intellectually stimulating conversations at home. My parents also had a penchant for reading and they initiated me into the wonderful world of books. The development of an interest in public speaking can vary from person to person. Some individuals may naturally feel drawn to speaking in public, while others may need more encouragement to overcome their fear of speaking in front of others. I belong to the first group. I also perceive glimpses of my parents' abilities in me especially to stand up for what I believe in.

Tell us more about the communications curriculum that you developed at GEMS Modern Academy?

In the 21st century, a communication curriculum is more important than ever before, as technology and globalisation have made effective communication a critical skill in almost every field. Students who develop strong communication skills in school are better prepared to succeed in a rapidly changing, interconnected world, and can adapt to the demands of the modern workplace. With this view in mind, I developed a whole school communication programme. This curriculum has been integrated into the existing school curriculum in a variety of ways, such as through language classes, public speaking courses, debate clubs and is an integral part of our integrated curriculum enrichment programme(ICE).

By incorporating communication skills into the broader curriculum, our school is helping students develop a well-rounded set of abilities that prepare them for success in all areas of life. Our programme is skill-based, graded and activity-oriented. We begin by teaching students the significance of non-verbal communication skills followed by verbal communication.

The introduction of a communication curriculum in school has led to several changes, such as – improved academic performance, increased confidence, improved career prospects and better preparation for success in the workforce.

Who is your favourite orator and why?

I am very fascinated by multiple people for the various communication strengths they exhibit. Oprah Winfrey for being a skilled interviewer and conversationalist who is empathetic, relatable, and able to connect with people from all walks of life. Simon Sinek, for his ability to inspire people to take action by connecting with their inner purpose and values, and Jimmy Fallon for his natural charisma and likability.

You train the students for UAE National Debate Team – tell us more about that. How do you start the training and what is involved?

Debate training typically involves developing a wide range of skills related to critical thinking, communication, and persuasion. Some of the skills taught during debate training include

research, understanding multiple formats, listening skills, time management, debate philosophy, linear arguments, debate mechanisms, and rebuttal strategies. Students of our school have been members of the UAE national debate team for many years. Their training starts in middle school. It takes years of training and multiple exposures to become an international debater. Most of our outstanding debaters have been trained for a minimum of four consecutive years. They have participated in almost all national and international tournaments and have won several world championships in the last 14 years.



Sumana (centre) with the 2021 winning Scholar's Cup team from GMA, in Barcelona.

Last year you won the Women Icon- Achiever of the Decade Award for Excellence in Coaching 2022 and Education 2.0 Outstanding Leadership Award – what do these wins mean to you?

Winning an award usually brings a sense of validation, pride, and accomplishment, and can also increase visibility and recognition within a particular field or industry, but for me it serves as motivation to continue to strive for excellence and push myself to achieve even greater heights in the future. Awards also validate the processes I bring to my discipline and allows me to reflect on my practices better.

You coach your fellow teachers at GMA – what kinds of communications challenges do you see among teachers?

When teaching communication strategies to teachers, the challenge is always the unlearning process. With age, people lose plasticity and that is what is required when new skills have to be acquired.

Are students or teachers harder to coach?

Honestly, it depends on individuals and their ability to take ongoing feedback in a positive manner. Those who receive feedback positively and act on them are the ones that benefit in the long run.



Who coaches you? How do you keep your skills sharp?

I constantly reinvent myself through training from international coaching organisations. I also keep in touch with peer groups. International conferences and gatherings also keep me connected with the latest developments in the field, but my core learning comes from students - the energy and novelty that comes from them, feeds directly into my growth process.

What is your public speaking pet peeve?

Breaking the flow of a speech and making a disparaging comment about someone or something