

Meena Kotecha: don't forget your smiles!

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Meena Kotecha – Management, Statistics

Meena Mehta Kotecha radiates positivity. Meena has been teaching mathematics MA 107, statistics MA 107/ST 102 and mathematical programming MG211.2 at LSE since October 2006 and currently teaches in the department of management and the department of Statistics. “*View your failures positively*”, she identifies as one of her main character traits. “*It’s the same advice I give to my students.*” It is not surprising that she admits being a great fan of Wayne Dyer, whose books deal with escaping negative thinking.

She describes her ideal student simply as “questioning”. Such an understanding of higher education as *questioning* sits well with her background in philosophy: before she started reading mathematics she obtained a BA Hons in Psychology and Philosophy, comparing Indian and Western philosophy; and an MA in sociology/anthropology. It also sits well with her belief that students need to be heard, that they need to be listened to. Meena appreciates students challenging her, believing that too to “be a very positive thing” and that it is important to connect to students both online and off-line. Peer support and peer learning are important to her: “*I am very passionate about student-led education. We need to hear the student voice.*”

Meena’s current research and pedagogical interest lies in a particular performance anxiety that affects many maths students: “*high performers worry that they might not be good enough, and low performers are forever trying to catch up.*” Meena cares very much about addressing this experience and alleviating it in her students. Positive thinking – and smiling – plays a great part in this. In June this year, she co-chaired the IMA International [Conference on Barriers and Enablers to Learning Maths](#) which focused on the phenomenon of maths anxiety in learners, and is awaiting publication of two research articles on how to reduce maths and statistics anxiety. Positive encouragement is key:

“I tell my students, you can forget your calculators, but please don’t forget your smiles.”

Her interest in the psychological well-being of her students led her to using social media and her use of it is exemplary (this year she has been named one of the 50 ‘[most influential social-media-using academics](#)’ in the UK). Meena uses facebook to engage students beyond the classroom, to share links to interesting stories, to upload her teaching materials, to field and answer queries (or encourage students to answer each other’s queries!). Of course, all this could easily be done in LSE Moodle, so why does she choose facebook instead?

“I feel that it is important to use a platform that students are comfortable with and which they associate with something pleasurable. Because they use facebook with friends, and they are always logged in, posts get read very quickly. This doesn’t happen in Moodle.”

Meena’s main concern, again, is to foster friendly and relaxed relationships; putting her students at ease takes precedence. Students don’t need to be her friend, she tells them, they don’t have to share their personal details, but she gets friend requests from them anyway, she says with a happy smile, clearly pleased. Facebook does have the advantage of being a place that students like to be in. Moodle’s current advantage over facebook is that *it isn’t facebook*, but we are still some way off to having made it a place to which students are permanently (and voluntarily) connected.

Although her success in fostering such engagement lies with her being able to transpose her personable self onto a social media platform, Meena’s favourite educational technology is PowerPoint. If this sounds like a surprising choice, her explanation remains in character: PowerPoint means she can continue to face her students while working through the course material, step by step examples and algebraic proofs using animation, thus maintaining eye contact – and not undermining her carefully built up rapport.

What Meena did and does:

- She teaches by “**LOL**” – **L**isten, **O**bserve, **L**earn: she observes her students and gains feedback from them on how to adapt her teaching strategy (“I am always keen to align my teaching to the requirements of the students.”)
- She encourages students to be speak to each other, to help and support and question each other;
- She uses social media to great effect while remaining inclusive:
 - She set up closed facebook groups for students to post queries, share relevant additional material and ask her questions, one for each course;
 - Her groups host discussion on practical applications of mathematical and statistical concepts/theories.
 - Students who are unwilling or unable to ‘do’ social media will be sent summaries of postings via email
 - Any of her students can set up a group, and this becomes an extension of the teaching room for students to interact in.
- She uses twitter ([@lseMeena61](#)) to keep up to date with research and what is happening at the LSE, and to maintain her friendly, inviting rapport with her students, former, current and potential future ones.

Words: Sonja Grussendorf
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