

EdTech Connection

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Spotlight
on student
Tsisana
Palmer

Professor wins international innovation award

EdTech student Tsisana Palmer

Pushing past the ordinary

By **JERRY FOSTER**

Lots of 18-year-olds want to get out of the house and see what's down the road, but when Tsisana Palmer was 18, things were different—much different.

She lived in Soviet-era Russia, where travel was restricted by vast distances and a shortage of money, and international travel through the iron curtain was the stuff that dreams were made of.

But an adventurous spirit pushes her past the ordinary. For example, she and her husband moved to Boise without jobs or prospects—**because, she said, they hadn't been here before. And they knew they'd find something.** They had marketable skills, optimism, and each other. Her husband works in information technology and she is a full time faculty member in the Intensive English program at Boise State, teaching English to international students.

At 18, Tsisana wanted to see the world, so she got a job at a Russian university—serving food to 150 naval cadets on a ship, and not any

ship, but a three-masted wind-jammer. The Russian Navy required cadets to have a historical experience at sea, perhaps to better appreciate modern naval technology.

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For two years, Tsisana and friends Elena and Zhana sailed from Vladivostok to Japan, South Korea, and sometimes other Pacific Rim ports. Japan was a three-or-four-day voyage, depending on the weather, and then—time off to roam.

In South Korea, the three of them—knowing no Korean or English at the time—would catch a bus to who-knows-where, and **then they'd buy some lunch at the end of the**

line, and take the bus back to port.

Unlike the cadets, the three girls were **allowed to raid the ship's refrigerator and cook** anything they wanted after hours. And, oh, those hours. Despite working 10, even 12, hours a day in the kitchen and food line—she and her friends made only a few dollars a day.

It had been fun, but Tsisana knew it was time to move on. Her mother, a kindergarten teacher, and her father, a manager in the fishing industry, had been encouraging her to get a college degree, so she enrolled in a university and worked as an administrative assistant in a large fishing company. Her courses were primarily self-study through most of the year, and then she absorbed 12 hours of lectures every day for two months in the dark deep-freeze of Russian winter.

“One could not miss it was winter, even inside the classroom,” she says. “Students would not dare to take their fur coats, hats, and gloves off for the entire day of lecturing – it was absolutely freezing, -20C (-4F), and windy outside, yet no heating (and sometimes even cracked windows) in those lecture halls.”

Several years after earning her degree in business management, she flew to the United States for a five-week intensive English course **at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. Her** assigned conversation partner was an American by the name of David Palmer. They talked a lot, and kept talking even after she returned to Russia. Finally, he talked her into marrying him.

Back in the United States, she earned a **master's degree in inter-cultural** communications at the University of Maryland before she and David moved to Idaho.

Russia's changed since Palmer last visited her family

Tsisana Palmer went home this summer to visit her mother, two sisters and a few friends.

In the three years since she was home in Vladivostok, Russia, some things have **changed, and some haven't.**

Change includes the amalgamation of five major universities into one large, beautiful, state-of-the art institution called Far-Eastern Federal University, which opened last year by hosting the 2012 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit.

Tsisana (pronounced TSi-saw-na) teaches academic English to international students at Boise State University, and studies part-time **in Boise State's EdTech master's program,** which has sensitized her to technology integration in education and connectivity in general.

In Vladivostok, a city of half a million in **Russia's far east, she saw smart phones and** tablets everywhere—busses, cafes, even on the beach—with 3G service. It was the first time she had seen wireless connectivity in private homes and public places.

But it is a different picture in Arsenyev, a city of about 50,000 people, located a couple of hundred miles to the north. There, people have DSL but not wireless service, and the villages in between had no connection at all.

“At times, it felt totally strange, being so disconnected from the world, especially for someone whose life revolves around the

Internet. At times, I would express my need to connect, only to be surprised with a response such as: **‘What is there to miss?’** ”

A lot of people she talked to use a social networking site called *Odnoklassniki* (Classmates) infrequently, once a month, perhaps, **and don’t quite understand the** difference between the internet and the social networking site. Even educated professionals say they barely use the internet.

A director of a local boarding school for gifted children said she hoped her teachers would be enthusiastic about using technology, but most of her teachers did not even have active e-mail addresses. She said she had classrooms equipped with whiteboards but no one knew how to use them. She was aware of Moodle and wanted to incorporate it at her school, but none of her faculty members knew how to use it; taking a course or a training was not an option either—not much is available in Russian.



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and strategies particularly interesting—online discussion forums, peer-review and sharing, projects with multimedia, etc. Tsisana even presented a tech integration workshop for a small group of educators and introduced them to Prezi, Google+ and Google Hangout, and Wordpress. Together, they set up a small blog and a Facebook page to continue this exchange of ideas and practices.

As Tsisana learned more about online or even just flipped instruction in Russia,

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the more curious she became about what was actually out there.

“I started searching and realized that, yes, the educational content was rather limited compared to what is available in English, but on contrary, there was plenty of inappropriate content.”

Her own nieces and nephews and the children of friends told her that they don’t really use the internet in school until they get to college.

She says she will continue to share ideas and practices with Russian educators—not at all surprising for a young woman who makes things happen.

Jerry Foster is an adviser / recruiter in Boise State’s Department of Educational Technology.

Russian teachers were eager to learn how Americans used technology in teaching, learning.

Through her relatives and friends, Tsisana met with a group of educators interested in learning about her experience of living and teaching abroad. They were especially curious about the teaching methods and practices used in the United States, as well as in the way technology is integrated into teaching and learning. Those teachers found online teaching methods