

“It’s better to develop research skills than learn a formula”

Founder of the Open Mind project and lecturer at the IT University Alexandra Tsai talks about the values and culture that drive people to change themselves and the world around them, and discusses ideas around responsibility, motivation and competition to obtain knowledge.

- Alexandra, you graduated from KIMEP and subsequently worked in business journalism. Why did you then go to the UK to get a Master's degree in art?

- I've always been interested in culture and the arts. Yes, I graduated from KIMEP with a degree in international Journalism and worked in the field of business journalism, but then I realized that all the most important human values are imparted through culture. And these cultural values are the thing which really drives our progress.

If we want to change something in our country, life, or career, we must understand that the desire for change in many respects depends on our basic values, vision, and understanding of the world, and on what we're striving to achieve personally. This scale of values serves as the basis for the practical steps we take. I've always been interested in culture as an area where an individual contemplates his or her self, their life and what they want to do with their life. I wanted to explore this area further, as it has some meaning for me.

- Why the UK?

- The choice to continue studying was a deliberate one. I chose the UK because I know the language. I looked at different programs and found a suitable one at the University of Warwick which, by the way, was recently ranked as one of the world's leading universities. Eventually I graduated with the Degree of Master of Arts with a focus on International Cultural Policy.

- What was your study like, and what do you consider was the main advantage of your Master's programme?

- We studied cultural theory, how European thinkers worked on discourses on culture over time, we looked at the value of culture for an individual, how an individual develops or grows through culture, what significance it has for the entire society, and how we need to develop culture and art so that they can benefit society.

There's a German word, 'bildung', which means 'constant growth' or 'education'. One of my professors said: 'You can see culture in the same way - it's not just a picture in a museum you look at, but a continuous process through which you can grow'. It is what develops human creativity, the need to create something and the kind of creative thinking which is applicable in any field.

In general, developing creativity and creative thinking is an important function of education. In school I had a wonderful teacher of mathematics who never made us learn formulas. We spent a huge amount of time in the classroom learning to deduce formulas ourselves. And when we had worked out the formulas, he said: 'Now you don't need to learn it by heart, because you know how to work it out yourself'. This is a great skill which, in my opinion, education should seek to impart - not just require a correct answer from a student, but teach him or her to solve different problems in the greatest possible number of ways. It's much better to develop research skills than simply to learn a formula!

A quality education is one by which you are taught to think, not just given knowledge as a fact. We were given five theories of the perception of art, and we realized that there are different views; we were given several theoretical frameworks, and we learned to look at any object through different frames and different interpretations - aesthetic, historical, sociological, gender and so on. At first it seemed very strange that there are no right answers. However, this approach generates critical thinking, and I liked it.

- You are currently teaching at the IT University. Why teaching? What do you see in today's students and what do you get from the process of teaching yourself?

- I personally found it very interesting to test myself as a teacher, because it's a vocation that's close to my heart. I see different tendencies in my students. I can't say that I see only good, but then the education system has a lot of problems itself. And the level of responsibility is scary. After all, a whole generation of people, who in a few years will make decisions, work and govern us, goes through this system. But what I've understood from my experience of teaching is that a good teacher can really motivate and encourage a person to develop. If a student wants to learn, there are many opportunities to learn even outside of the formal education system. In my opinion, the role of a teacher in this day and age is not so much to teach, because you cannot teach everything, but to motivate your students to learn.

- What is the difference in how Kazakhstani and UK universities work, from your perspective?

- The first difference is responsibility. I was really struck by this while studying in the UK. Our university had a huge four-storey library with reading rooms, but you could arrive there at 10 a.m. and find no empty seats. At the same time, during the examination period the library was open 24 hours a day. Students have a sense of responsibility, they enter university highly motivated - they need it, they are interested, they discuss with each other the knowledge they've gained, so the atmosphere is very lively.

The second difference is motivation. The third one is competition. In Kazakhstan, we don't welcome competition, we welcome cooperation. If you're a straight-A student, you might feel uncomfortable and help your peers to cheat on an exam so that they get a good grade. In the West, cheating is shameful because you're stealing someone else's intellectual work, and the common attitude toward intellectual work is different.

- You're one of the organizers of TEDxAlmaty, and last year you launched the Open Mind educational project. Why do you think this project is necessary? What is its goal?

- Open mind is a culturological lecture-based project, a platform for the informal education process, where lectures are accompanied by discussions, meetings and workshops. Lectures and meetings cover subjects such as art, culture, literature, painting, philosophy, psychology, self-development, and history, among others.

This came from a long-held idea, because I really liked the open lecture format. I wanted to open meetings and lectures on culture and philosophy because I'm a big fan of discussing those subjects, and I think they are unfairly unpopular here. I think the humanities bring a fresh perspective to the world, to people and to perceptions of beauty, and they suggest that this beauty can be very different, unusual and sometimes incomprehensible.

When we worked on the format of the lectures, we wanted to get feedback from the audience and make the lectures interactive so that the things we discuss could be immediately integrated into our lives. Open Mind is a process through which we (co-workers or colleagues, including the culture expert Guzel Kamalova) learn a lot about ourselves and try something new.

- Many people in Kazakhstan say they want economic growth, but do not mention cultural growth. Do you think that true growth is possible without culture?

- Cultural development fosters economic development through theaters, music, design, and tourism - people like to visit special cultural events. Therefore by developing your culture you develop a creative economy. So economically it makes sense, but it's important to remember that the development of culture and art is not only about the economy. It's also a reflection of who we are, what makes us different from others, what we appreciate, what we remember, and what unites us as a society.

Speaking of cultural growth, we say that it's essential for the growth of our society. Look at Europe, for example: they have their own European values on which they base decisions, including political decisions. It's a kind of social contract. For example, Angela Merkel says: 'We have to accept migrants because we have to follow our European values.' And these values are shared not only by an individual, but by the entire country.

- What values do you see in our society?

- In my opinion, our most important value is the integration of different ethnic groups into society. Kazakhstan has over 120 ethnicities represented among its citizens, but the minority groups are not social outsiders – they're well-integrated. Ethnic policy is a live process, and one that is changing, but ethnic integration is a highly important starting condition.

We also have very strong traditional values, with all the pros and cons that these bring. We perceive many social constructs - gender, culture - as a kind of fundamental reality. We have a traditional patriarchal society and I think today it's becoming even more closed than it has been.

- What, in your opinion, are the three most important skills needed for modern people in Kazakhstan today? How you motivate yourself to develop?

- Critical thinking is the most important skill. The second, I would say, is responsibility towards yourself. If you take a decision, then all the actions you take next are an expression of your responsibility. This is always expressed through your deeds and actions. How do I motivate myself to develop? Probably mostly through books. And, maybe, through curiosity. I like to be surprised, to find beauty, to discover it in different forms, in the arts professionally and in the context of chance events and the discordant choral music of life.

Three books that will make you more cultured (it's difficult to pick just three, of course, but in my opinion they are the following): 'Hell' from Dante's The Divine Comedy (Anna Akhmatova said that she read Dante all her life. I can't say I understand it in its entirety, but this piece of writing certainly makes you more cultured, no doubt about it), The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov, plus any collection of poems of your choice.