Sometimes They Disappear Altogether: Lessons from the Rock Tumbler

Michele Doney

When I was a girl, I got a lot of girl gifts: Barbie dolls, baby dolls, plastic jewelry, purses shaped like cartoon animals, and that scary disembodied head with plastic hair that's meant to help girls learn how to apply makeup. The gifts my big brother received were, in my opinion, far superior: Building gifts. Science gifts. Boy gifts. It was the 1970's. That's how things were. One of the things I longed for, but would never receive, was a rock tumbler. You could pick up a rock right off the ground, put it in this magical device, and it would come out shiny and perfect! Who wouldn't be into that? But in the opinion of my very traditional, 1970's parents, that was not a toy for girls.

Now I am an aunt to three nieces, all fast approaching the tween years. Every year for Christmas and birthdays, I log on to my favorite online store for educational toys and shop for them in the "recommended for boys" section. My little brother reports that the gifts I give are the only ones the girls keep playing with year after year. This year, they all got rock tumblers. And while I was online trying to figure out how to ship the tumblers in my shopping cart to three girls in two different states, it hit me: I'm a grown woman with a job. Add a fourth rock tumbler to my shopping cart? Yes, please. Check here if shipping address is the same as billing address? Check. Yes. Yes, it is.

Fortunately, most of my vacations are spent in Ontario on a Lake Erie beach, where little round rocks are everywhere. As a result, when my tumbler arrived in the mail, I already had a bunch of rocks ready to tumble. I started my first load right before New Year's Eve. As a beginner, I'm finding out there's a lot to learn about this hobby. Surprisingly, a lot of those lessons are also relevant here in the learning center. Here are some of the big ones.

Lesson One: There are no shortcuts. These things take time.

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It takes at least three weeks to tumble one load of rocks, give or take, depending on the type of rocks and the shape they were in when you found them. So it is with our students. Not every student comes to us in the same condition and some will make progress faster than others, no matter what, we cannot work miracles overnight. Everybody involved in the process of learning assistance needs to have patience: The tutors, the instructor who teaches the course, the members of the center's supervisory staff who are under pressure to produce results, the folks at the top who apply that pressure and are under pressure themselves, and, of course, the students. Especially the students.

Lesson Two: All rocks are different, and you can't treat them all the same way. If you do, not all of them will shine, some of them will even disappear.

This was perhaps the biggest surprise from my first load of rocks: When the tumbler finished its last cycle, some of the rocks were gone! The constant friction had literally ground them down to nothing. Of those that survived, some were definitely shinier than others.

So it is with our students. Some students thrive in college and will graduate with a high polish. Others are ground down by the constant demands of college-level academics. If we don't provide conditions that are conducive to their success, not only will some of them never find their chance to really shine, some will disappear altogether. Plan carefully. Check in periodically to see how things are going. Make changes when it's necessary. Don't assume what you're doing will impact every student the same way.

Lesson Three: You need to learn a lot about the rocks before you can put them in the tumbler. If you take the time to learn about the rocks and customize the tumbling to fit their needs, your rocks will turn out better.

The solution to the problem of the disappearing rocks is to learn a lot about rocks. Rocks have different origins and different physical properties. They're not all equally prepared for the rigors of the rock tumbler. A key rock property is Mohs Hardness. Simply put, some rocks are harder than others. If you

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know what type of rock it is, you can look up its hardness. If you don't, you can test for hardness using simple tools. Some types of rocks can be tossed right into the tumbler and tumbled at top speed. For others, you may need to use a finer grit or tumble them at a slower speed for a longer time to achieve the desired result.

So it is with our students. A one-size-fits-all approach rarely works. Design your center's programming to include a mix of different interventions for students with different needs. Develop (and follow!) a rigorous assessment plan that will help you determine what is working and for whom. Look for sources of data to help you decide. Institutional Research can help. The research literature can help. Colleagues you meet at conferences can help. Faculty can help. The students themselves can help. When is a group setting appropriate, and when is one-on-one attention the better choice? What's the right balance between tutoring student in course content and helping them develop broadly applicable mindsets and study strategies? Learn about your students so you can fit the right program to the right student. This will help them shine.

Lesson Four: Success doesn't always look the way you think it will. It helps to broaden your definition.

The rocks that survived the tumbler weren't just smaller and shinier. Some of them looked radically different than I anticipated. In some cases, they were a completely different shape or color. In others, losing some outer layers revealed inner features I couldn't have guessed were there. But they were all beautiful in their own way.

So it is with our students. Do the students who use your center have higher grades than the students who don't? Yes? Great. No? Don't panic—maybe you're not looking for the right signs of success. If tutoring is voluntary, then tutees are self-selecting. Comparing them to non-tutees is probably not the right way to gauge the success of your program, even if that's what your boss wants you to do. Are your students learning new study strategies? Have their attitudes and beliefs about their courses and

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themselves changed for the better? Do they feel a stronger sense of connection to the campus? Are they persisting in challenging majors because help is available? Are they maintaining their eligibility for financial aid or to keep playing their sport? Staying off academic probation? Now, turn your attention from the students to the tutors. How has serving as tutors contributed to their own success?

Lesson Five: It helps to have colleagues. Joining a community of practice and asking for help when you need it can make all the difference.

I bought my rock tumbler from an online toy store. As you can imagine, the instructions in the box were aimed at a young audience and not particularly detailed. Hence, the disappearing rocks. In order to get the hang of this, I needed help. Fortunately, I soon found out that the internet is full of "rockhounds", and there are lots of people out there ready and willing to help a newbie out. Blogs, Facebook groups, you name it. There's even a Facebook group for rock identification. You post a photo of your rock and as much detail as you know, and they'll tell you what they think it is. If your latest batch in the tumbler comes out dull, your fellow tumblers will rally around you, help you figure out where you went wrong, and point you to a dozen resources to help you get it right the next time.

So it is with learning centers. If you've never experienced the trove of collective intelligence that is the LRNASST-L listserv, you need to subscribe to it right away! Likewise the annual conferences of the national organizations and their regional affiliates. Try all of the CLADEA-member organizations until you find the best fit for your needs (try ATP first, of course!). Gather up business cards wherever you go and form your own posse for mutual support. Attend summer institutes, participate in webinars, and pursue national certifications. Call up a learning center on another campus in your region and ask if you can visit to get some new ideas. I bet they will say yes.

Lesson Six: Tumbled rocks are mesmerizing. Put them somewhere where you can see them.

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My partner will tell you I am obsessed with my first batch of rocks. I'm proud of them. I want to look at them all the time. I'm constantly pulling my favorite ones out of the jar and showing them to him. He knows it brings me joy to celebrate how great they turned out and showcase the special ones. So it should be with our success stories at work. Find ways to celebrate the success of your students.

Tell others about your obsessions! –ed.

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