

Reflecting on Glass

She holds the heavy, pointed block of glass in her hands, and reads the words etched on it, words designed to recognise and celebrate her achievements as an early career researcher. The weight makes her arms ache so she carefully places it on the table, where it catches the last rays of the evening sun as it dips its head before the approaching night. She gazes at the glass, which sparkles and refracts rainbows of light across the room. Her thoughts drift away to consider the processes and people involved in making it.



Traditionally glass has been made from sand which has been heated and shaped, mimicking the process that takes occurs in nature when sand is struck by lightning, or some other explosive force. But with this glass, someone had to have a plan, a design, know what they were making. Someone else needed the technical expertise to make the machines, to etch the words, to make the satin-lined box it came in. Others were responsible for selling it, promoting, pricing, advertising, buying it to present to someone else... so many people needed for one block of glass.

She moves to the computer, keen to learn more, she reads, *“Glass is a bit of a riddle. It's hard enough to protect us, but it shatters with incredible ease. It's made from opaque sand, yet it's completely transparent. And, perhaps most surprisingly of all, it behaves like a solid material... but it's also a sort of weird liquid in disguise!”*¹ Intriguing words, that lead her to question why she has not thought about this before.

Glass has a curious ability to refract, reflect, and transmit light – properties we exploit to enable us to look at ourselves and at our world. Glass is everywhere, letting light enter the places where we live, work, shop, the places where we go to learn – schools, colleges, libraries. It

holds our ‘stuff’ – bottles, jars, wine glasses. It helps us to read, in varifocal and magnified ways.

Metaphorically, glass is much like research, with its need for planning, transparency, reflection, a vessel to hold and interpret our discoveries so that we can share them with others. This particular piece of glass acts as a metaphor to reflect, refract and illuminate the processes of her own research. Thinking about the grains of sand, she recalls the practitioners and young people working together to explore natural spaces, and discovering themselves in the process. The pointed shape of the glass reminds her of the mountains, of the experiences she shared there. The pressure, the heat, the effort needed to make the glass, mirror the challenges of conducting research.

She needs her glasses to focus on the words, and remembers those who need support to be able to access natural spaces, as well as the support she has needed to guide her with the research. Thinking back over the last few years, she realizes how much she has been changed by the research. She gazes in a mirror and observes that although outwardly she may not look that different, perhaps a bit greyer and more wrinkled, but inside her head is now a very different place, thanks to the transformatory powers of the learning process.

The block of glass silently and wonderfully reflects this.

¹ <http://www.explainthatstuff.com/glass.html>