

Rube Goldberg Lives!

“It would have worked if . . .” one student said, repeating himself, using a softer voice each time.

“Why? Why? Why?” asked another student, talking to the contraption on the round table in front of her.

The mixture of the odd, the silly, the disparate objects, the causes and effects, the improvised, the clever, the serendipitous – all come together in the brains of students on the Rube Goldberg Project Week team. Leaders Brian and Justin stand back like basketball coaches, asking questions, reiterating points of big picture or small, detailed needs.

There’s a copy machine at the end of the long 7-table setup in the Campus Center. The goal is to push the “COPY” button (a falling golf ball does this) and make a copy. But the start button is 30 feet away and 6 circuitous tables of cause and effect or “steps” as they call them here.

Each table, prepared by 2 students, sets up a station with 10- to 12 steps occurring. It’s impossible to not be drawn in. Impossible not to watch and smile.

When the hair dryer goes off and spits the ping pong ball through plastic pipe.

When the dominoes push the toy car that pushes the votive candle and lights a flame under the string to release the hammer hanging above.

When the bocce ball, the inflatable flamingo, the pulleys, more dominoes, a ladder, a straw hat, a nerf gun, bowling balls – all do their Rube Goldberg thing – pushing, dropping, flipping, swatting, pulling their way toward the copy machine.

It makes me think of land mines, somehow. And Marcel Duchamp. And Saturday cartoons. And geniuses doing research. These students employ their hands (power tools, hand tools, cutting, sawing, fastening) and eyes. Hand-eye coordination. Teamwork in pairs, blind to what the other pairs are doing (until later). Feeding their inner physicist and nerd.

Such lessons in trial and error. In patience and detail. But not really “lessons” - ergonomics and kinesthetics all rolled into one goal: make a photocopy. And so much more than that. It’s the reincarnation of Rube himself.

Thanks Brian and Justin. I’m inspired to watch your team work. And play.

Stephen Ringo

Casual Observer