Opening the Little Boxes in Our Minds  
Dr Linda Karges-Bone, Alpha Tau Chapter  
ADK Journal

Although the famous cowboy crooner Roy Rogers introduced the song in one of his western film hits in 1945, many people attribute the song to Kate Smith’s radio program in 1944. It is the memorable Cole Porter tune, “Don’t Fence Me In”. Why do so many connect to that tune? I think it is our natural inclination to resent being “fence in” or as one of my favorite children’s books says: “boxed in”.

We like to do that. Put people behind fences. In boxes. Into mental confinements where we can control them, or at least try to. And that’s a shame. In the story mentioned earlier, which I actually use as much in corporate training as in children’s lessons, the main character sees the world from a unique perspective. Everybody else sees a simple cardboard box, but he thinks more creatively, imagining everything from a robot to a mountain top chalet. He even refuses to call it a box, naming it his “Not a Box”, so that others might begin to understand that there are no limits except the ones that we impose. And, we do impose these limits.

Recently, a program director whom I respect greatly, encouraged me to write about this human trait. Terri Livingston works with young children and was talking about teachers’ tendencies to label children, especially in
terms of negative attributes. “It is hard to undo or release those thoughts once they are poured over you,” she lamented. Then, she went on to say this, which I found critical. “It is like my childhood Jack in the Box toy; that clown was always trapped in the box, while an outsider turned the handle over and over, controlling him, allowing him to pop up briefly and startle you, but then always pushed back inside.”

Wow. Isn’t that what we are likely to do to our students, colleagues, and even those closest? We keep them in a box, or behind a fence, so that we can control what we think they are or should be.

Let’s change that.

**Why Do We Do It?**

Why do we put people, young and not so young, into “little boxes” or “behind fences”? I think there are seven reasons. Which ones resonate with you as an educator?

- Some people have strong qualities, either positive or negative, that make it easy to plug them into certain spots in our minds.
- It is easier to negotiate relationships and communication when we know where everyone fits.
- We have learned biases (gender, race, age) that are difficult to overcome.
- Past experiences in our lives, cultures, or community create natural niches into which we fit others.
- We look only on the external or superficial features of the individual.
- Individuals put up “masks” to protect themselves and we don’t stop to investigate further.
- Fatigue, stress, time constraints and distractions limit our ability to apply intuition and discernment.

**How To Let the Jack (Or Jill) Out of the Box**

Here are a few strategies to keep an open mind when dealing with students, their family members, or colleagues. Start with this important advice from life coach Kate Nasser.¹

**Ask more questions.** Talk to people. It keeps us in learning mode. It gives us knowledge and insight to replace labels. “If you’re tired of arguing with

---

¹ [https://katenasser.com/people-skills-learning-why-label-people-stop/](https://katenasser.com/people-skills-learning-why-label-people-stop/)
strangers on the Internet, try talking with one of them in real life. ~Barack Obama, Farewell Address Jan. 2017”

If we don’t like the behavior we see, state what change we want to see. For example, if a teammate isn’t completing their tasks and it’s delaying our work, it’s far more productive to speak with the teammate and express what we need instead of labeling them as lazy.

In addition, I recommend two additional strategies:

1. Ask yourself why you chose the particular label. For example, if you labeled a child as “bossy”, is it because you genuinely feel she is overwhelming or is it because you haven’t found a way to keep her occupied and engaged? Keeping her in a “Bossy Box” is easier than creating new ways to help her feel calm and connected.

2. Keep in mind that some of the handy boxes and labels that you use may actually be functions of personality and learning styles, especially if the traits you are attempting to cage and corral are very different from your own. For example, someone whom you label as “brash” or “flashy” may simply be an over the top extrovert. I remember, years and years ago, when I was interviewing for an early teaching job on a faculty that was made up of proper Southern ladies who only wore tiny gold post earrings and a set of pearls for adornment. My large, shiny earring and colorful clothing, a product of my vivacious Italian personality quickly earned me the label of “showy” and “outsider”. I found this out years later when I had made friends with the principal. “Wow,” he said. “We made a mistake not hiring you when we had the chance. You are such a gifted teacher. You just seemed so different at the time.” Yes. “Different”, a code word in the labeling world.

3. Imagine that every word you use to describe students, family members, or colleagues was going to be broadcast live for the next week. Every word. How would your tone and word choices reflect on you personally and professionally? Would they be kind or cutting? Then, rewind the tape and change out a few descriptors.

In case you are stuck in a rut, labeling folks too quickly and with a liberal dose of negativity, try this box to help you shift cognitive gears.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Label</th>
<th>Positive Switch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bossy</td>
<td>Busy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gossipy</td>
<td>Friendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nosy</td>
<td>Curious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sullen</td>
<td>Detached</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messy</td>
<td>Creative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>Bold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyper</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontational</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insolent</td>
<td>Sassy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loud</td>
<td>Upbeat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Conduct staff development that challenges the ways that faculty and staff think. I like using the children’s book mentioned above, “Not a Box”. Bring in a large cardboard box. Ask participants to describe what they see. Write down their responses. Then, read the story aloud and repeat the exercise. What happens?

**Why It Matters**

When we fall into the trap of boxing people in, we lose valuable opportunities for living, learning, and leaning into life. We lose them for ourselves and we limit the possibilities for others. Like the classic children’s toy, the “Jack in the Box”, our labels trap the creative spirit and keep it from reaching potential. As an educator charged with stimulating the minds of students and motivating others in the building to do the same, it is important to examine the role of labels, boxes, and fences in communication and interaction. Break out of the box. Tear down the fence. Shred the labels. It is so much more fun that way.