



Box Up Your Life

We often ask students to write autobiographically or to draw or paint self-portraits. In this activity, students work on a different kind of self-portrait, a symbolic one. First, students think about the aspects of themselves and their lives that are most important to them. Then they look for objects that symbolize each aspect. Finally, students assemble the objects into a boxed display representative of themselves. You and your students will marvel at the variety of both interests and expression this project inspires.

Learning Objectives

Through this activity, students will:

- identify personal characteristics, preferences, interests, feelings, and beliefs
- recognize commonalities among themselves
- think and work creatively to craft a personalized display box
- symbolize both abstract and concrete ideas

Product

Individual, student-created “life boxes”

Related Curriculum

Language Arts, Social Studies, Math, Art

Materials

- copies of “A Plan to Box Up My Life” hand-out (pages 50–51) for each student
- shoe box for each student
- art materials for creating and decorating boxes (foam core, cardboard, glue, paints, wrapping paper, and so on)

Optional: *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox

For Family Extension: camcorder and blank videocassette

Time

One 45-minute session to introduce the activity; additional at-home or in-class time to complete the boxes; five minutes per student for presentation of boxes

Preparation

This activity seems to work best when the teacher also shares a life box. Create yours ahead of time to share with students when you introduce the activity. Include a variety of aspects of yourself: physical traits that describe you, interests or hobbies, important beliefs, pivotal experiences, goals.

Activity Steps

1. Introduce the activity. Ask the class how they would describe the idea of “memory” to a creature from another planet who does not know the meaning of the word. Encourage students to respond in different directions by asking such questions as:

- What picture comes to your mind when you hear the word “memory”?
- What color do you think “memory” is? Why?
- If you used one object to demonstrate a special memory you have, what would it be? Why?

Optional: If you have a copy of *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*, share this heartwarming story with your students. It introduces the art of describing an abstract trait, such as memory, in

concrete terms. Read the story to the class and follow it with a discussion about Wilfrid Gordon's attempts to get Miss Nancy's memory back for her. Review the words used in the book to describe memory.

2. Discuss ways to visually represent abstract concepts. Ask students to think about some ways to "show" abstract concepts. Ask questions similar to these:

- What does "friendship" ("peace," "love") mean to you?
- What object could you use to show the concept of friendship (peace, love)?

Show students your life box and review how it uses objects to represent some of your memories as well as other characteristics about you. Explain to students that they will be using this idea of representing characteristics with objects in a creative project about their own lives. As you share your box, be specific about why you selected certain items and why you decorated your box as you did.

3. Do personal brainstorming. Give students copies of the "A Plan to Box Up My Life" hand-out and have them independently brainstorm 15 characteristics, interests, feelings, beliefs, preferences, goals, or other things that make up what's most important in their lives. Be sure they include at least three abstract concepts such as feelings, shared values, or personal traits. Here are a few starter ideas:

- *feelings:* love, excitement, confusion, joy, trust, hope, anticipation, closeness
- *shared values:* religious faith, interest in politics, care for the environment, love of family
- *personal traits:* musical, athletic, thoughtful, clever, different, jumpy
- *hobbies and interests:* photography, collecting baseball cards, pets, skating, music

Next to each item, students should write down a specific object or thing they could use to represent that aspect of themselves.

After brainstorming, have students mark with an asterisk (*) the 10 aspects that they consider to be the most creative and unique and that best

represent them. Be sure that students now include at least two abstract concepts.

4. Explain how to make the boxes. Encourage students to use their own ideas for both filling and decorating their life boxes. Offer these guidelines:

- Include in your box at least 10 items that symbolize your most significant interests and personal characteristics.
- Plan and construct your box carefully so it's a complete and well-designed self-portrait.
- Decorate your box in a way that reflects something about yourself. (For example, cover it in wrapping paper with a balloon design to represent your love of celebrations.)

Give a specific date when you want the life boxes to be completed and brought into class. Offer both an oral and a written reminder on the board at least two days before the boxes are due.

5. Share the boxes in class. It is best to space these presentations so that everyone is attentive during the descriptions. We have found that three or four at one time seem to keep everyone's attention.

For Surefire Success

Before starting this activity, be sure you have collected enough boxes. You may wish to have each student bring in a box by a certain date. One good source of boxes is a discount shoe store that doesn't rely on shoe boxes being distributed with their product.

School Extension

Explain your project to your principal, another school administrator, another teacher, or other school personnel. Ask these individuals to prepare their own life boxes to share as a surprise to your students.

Family Extension

Videotape the presentations. Then loan the video to families (for a weekend or a few days) or play it at the beginning of an open house or in a common waiting area during conferences.

A Plan to Box Up My Life

Name: _____

Use these categories to get started brainstorming. Add as many others as you wish!

My feelings:

My interests:

My hobbies:

Things I like:

My favorite possessions:



