

RELATIONSHIPS

Understanding Students' Backgrounds and Interests

THE **MARZANO COMPENDIUM** OF
INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES



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INTRODUCTION

In 2007, Dr. Robert J. Marzano published *The Art and Science of Teaching: A Comprehensive Framework for Effective Instruction*. The framework, composed of three lesson segments, ten design questions, and forty-one elements, was based on research showing that teacher quality is one of the strongest influences on student achievement—that is, an effective teacher can positively and significantly impact student learning. As such, *The Art and Science of Teaching* sought to identify specific action steps teachers could take to improve their effectiveness.

In 2015, Dr. Marzano updated *The Art and Science of Teaching* framework to reflect new insights and feedback. The Marzano Compendium of Instructional Strategies is based on this updated model, presenting forty-three elements of effective teaching in ten categories. Each folio in the series addresses one element and includes strategies, examples, and reproducible resources. The Compendium and its folios are designed to help teachers increase their effectiveness by focusing on professional growth. To that end, each folio includes a scoring scale teachers can use to determine their proficiency with the element, as well as numerous strategies that teachers can use to enact the element in their classrooms. Indeed, the bulk of each folio consists of these strategies and reproducibles for implementing and monitoring them, making the Compendium a practical, actionable resource for teachers, instructional coaches, teacher mentors, and administrators.

UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' BACKGROUNDS AND INTERESTS

Teachers with a knowledge of students' backgrounds and interests can choose content that is personally relevant to students and build effective and meaningful relationships with students. Furthermore, understanding students' backgrounds and interests can create an atmosphere of cooperation in a classroom and decrease classroom disruptions. Perhaps most importantly, when teachers reach out to students to attempt to understand their backgrounds and interests, it shows students that the teacher is interested in their lives as individuals, not just students, and helps them feel more accepted in the classroom and more trusting of the teacher.

Monitoring This Element

There are specific student responses that indicate this element is being effectively implemented. Before trying strategies for the element in the classroom, it is important that the teacher knows how to identify the types of student behaviors that indicate the strategy is producing the desired effects. General behaviors a teacher might look for include the following.

- When asked, students describe the teacher as someone who knows them and is interested in them.
- Students respond when the teacher demonstrates understanding of their interests and backgrounds.
- When asked, students say they feel accepted.

Desired behaviors such as these are listed for each strategy in this element.

Teachers often wonder how their mastery of specific strategies relates to their mastery of the element as a whole. Successful execution of an element does not depend on the use of every strategy within that element. Rather, multiple strategies are presented within each element to provide teachers with diverse options. Each strategy can be an effective means of implementing the goals of the element. If teachers attain success using a particular strategy, it is not always necessary to master the rest of the strategies within the same element. If a particular strategy proves difficult or ineffective, however, teachers are encouraged to experiment with various strategies to find the method that works best for them.

Scoring Scale

The following scoring scale can help teachers assess and monitor their progress with this element. The scale has five levels, from Not Using (0) to Innovating (4). A teacher at the Not Using (0) level is unaware of the strategies and behaviors associated with the element or is simply not using any of the strategies. At the Beginning (1) level, a teacher attempts to address the element by trying specific strategies, but does so in an incomplete or incorrect way. When a teacher reaches the Developing (2) level, he or she implements strategies for the element correctly and completely, but does not monitor their effects. At the Applying (3) level, a teacher implements strategies for the element and monitors their effectiveness with his or her students. Finally, a teacher at the Innovating (4) level is fluent with strategies for the element and can adapt them to unique student needs and situations, creating new strategies for the element as necessary.

Scale for Understanding Students' Backgrounds and Interests

4	3	2	1	0
Innovating	Applying	Developing	Beginning	Not Using
I adapt behaviors and create new strategies for unique student needs and situations.	I understand students' backgrounds and interests, and I monitor the extent to which my actions affect students.	I understand students' backgrounds and interests, but I do not monitor the effect on students.	I use the strategies and behaviors associated with this element incorrectly or with parts missing.	I am unaware of strategies and behaviors associated with this element.

The following examples describe what each level of the scale might look like in the classroom.

Not Using (0): A teacher knows relatively little about students' backgrounds or interests. What background information she does know she found out by accident. As such, the teacher does not use students' backgrounds and interests to inform instruction or interactions with students.

Beginning (1): A teacher sporadically seeks out information about some students and their lives outside of the classroom. However, he does not use this information to improve interaction with students.

Developing (2): A teacher has an understanding of students' backgrounds and interests and uses this knowledge to inform instruction. However, the teacher pays little attention to whether students feel welcome and supported as a result of her actions.

Applying (3): A teacher has a good understanding of his students' backgrounds and interests and regularly applies this knowledge to his lessons and in his interactions with students. The teacher monitors students' attitudes and behaviors in class and specifically reaches out to students with whom he has strained relationships or who seem to be disengaged.

Innovating (4): A teacher seeks to better understand the backgrounds and interests of students who need additional support. For example, she first uses student background surveys and opinion questionnaires to get an idea of the backgrounds and interests of the students in her class. Once she identifies students who do not get as much support from home, she takes care to actively comment on those students' achievements whenever possible and uses this information to inform her comments during parent-teacher conferences.

STRATEGIES

Each of the following strategies describes specific actions that teachers can take to enact this element in their classrooms. Strategies can be used individually or in combination with each other. Each strategy includes a description, a list of teacher actions, a list of desired student responses, and suggestions for adapting the strategy to provide extra support or extensions. Extra support and extensions relate directly to the Innovating (4) level of the scale. Extra support involves steps teachers can take to ensure they are implementing the strategy effectively for all students, including English learners, special education students, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and reluctant learners. Extensions are ways that teachers can adapt the strategy for advanced students. In addition, some strategies include technology tips that detail ways teachers can use classroom technology to implement or enhance the strategy. Finally, each strategy includes further information, practical examples, or a reproducible designed to aid teachers' implementation of the strategy.

Student Background Surveys

Teachers should try to learn a little bit about each student at the beginning of the year to understand the backgrounds students are coming from and to obtain information on which to build relationships with students. One common way of obtaining such information is the student background survey—a questionnaire given at the start of the school year or beginning of a course containing questions relevant to students' lives. The survey could include questions about students' academic interests (favorite and least favorite subject in school), personal interests (hobbies, sports, lessons, art, books, video games, movies, and television shows), dreams, fears, family members, and family activities (traditions, vacations, and gatherings). Teachers can also provide sentence stems for students, such as, “During my free time I like to _____” or “Someday I'd like to be _____.” Teachers can then use the information on the background surveys to inform interactions with students throughout the year.

Teacher Actions

- Creating survey questions that elicit information about students' backgrounds, interests, and goals
- Encouraging students to answer survey questions thoroughly and completely
- Evaluating survey responses to identify students' backgrounds, interests, and goals

Desired Student Responses

- Responding to survey questions honestly and in detail
- Describing the teacher as someone who is interested in them

Extra Support

- Allowing students to record (audio or video) their responses to background survey questions if they aren't comfortable writing them

Extension

- Asking students to create artwork, musical compositions, written pieces, films, or other media to express their backgrounds, interests, and goals

Technology Tips

- Use polling software to conduct a student background survey, and use the results to divide students into small groups based on common interests or backgrounds.
- Create a student background survey using an online survey tool. Have students analyze the class's responses to better understand one another's unique backgrounds and interests.
- Ask students to take and edit a photo of themselves and incorporate those photos into their student background surveys. Use these photos to help memorize students' names.

Example Questions for Student Background Surveys

- Where were you born?
- How many brothers and sisters do you have?
- What are some things about your family that make you proud?
- What kinds of things did you do over the summer or on vacation that you enjoyed?
- What would you do if you knew you wouldn't fail?
- Do you have any hobbies (collecting things, artistic endeavors, building things)? If so, what are they?
- Do you participate in sports? If so, which sport(s)? What do you like best about playing that sport?
- Do you take lessons of any kind (music, art, singing, dance, speech)? If so, what kind?
- What is your favorite book, game, movie, video or computer game, or television show?
- If you had to describe yourself in a sentence or two, what might you say that would help others learn something about your personal interests?
- During my free time I like to _____.
- One thing I really like to do with my friends is _____.
- I really enjoy _____.
- My family enjoys _____.
- If I had a month of Saturdays, I'd spend most of my time _____.
- Someday I'd like to be _____.

Opinion Questionnaires

Opinion questionnaires, like student background surveys, can be used by teachers to better understand students' perspectives and backgrounds. However, opinion questionnaires generally focus on relevant classroom topics rather than more general information about the student. For example, a science teacher might create an opinion questionnaire that asks students the degree to which they find biology interesting, easy, and relevant. The science opinion questionnaire might also subtly gauge students' feelings of competence related to specific tasks by asking questions such as, How comfortable do you feel measuring exact quantities of liquid? How easy do you find memorization of long lists of names? How confident do you feel using a calculator to find the answer to basic algebraic equations?

Teacher Actions

- Creating questions that prompt students to share their perspectives on classroom topics
- Discussing students' opinions about classroom topics
- Incorporating students' opinions into classroom activities

Desired Student Responses

- Responding to questions honestly and in detail
- Explaining the reasons for their opinions

Extra Support

- Allowing students to record (audio or video) their responses to opinion questionnaire questions

Extension

- Asking students to create artwork, musical compositions, written pieces, films, or other media that express their opinions on classroom topics

Example Opinion Questionnaire Items

- Which subject do you like the best? Why?
- Which subject do you like the least? Why?
- Would you rather work alone, in a small group, or in a large group?
- Where do you study or do your homework?
- What is the ideal environment for you to study?
- If you could improve in one way at school, what would it be?
- Name one thing that you think you do really well at school.
- When you're at school, how do you normally feel?
- What's one thing about school that you enjoy?
- What's one thing about school that you find frustrating?

Understanding Students' Backgrounds and Interests

- How often does an adult help you with your homework?
- To what degree do you find this subject interesting?
- To what degree do you find this subject difficult?
- To what degree do you find this subject important?
- Is it easier for you to learn something if you hear it, see it, or do it? Explain.
- Do you feel competent in your abilities with this subject? Explain.
- What is something that teachers have done in the past that you did like?
- What is something that teachers have done in the past that you did not like?
- What's something that the teacher could do that would help you learn?
- What has been your favorite assignment you've ever completed? Why?
- What would happen in your ideal class?
- What has been the most frustrating assignment you've ever been assigned? Why?

Individual Student-Teacher Conferences

Individual student-teacher conferences provide an opportunity for teachers to meet one-on-one with students and use probing questions to better understand students' backgrounds and interests. In an individual student-teacher conference, the teacher can cover both academic and nonacademic topics. For example, a teacher may begin a student-teacher conference by asking about the student's previous school experiences and home background. Over the course of the meeting, however, the teacher may transition into asking about the student's interests and perspectives on current issues.

Teacher Actions

- Scheduling individual student-teacher conferences
- Summarizing what he or she already knows about a student prior to the conference
- Preparing questions that probe more deeply into a student's interests, perspectives, and experiences

Desired Student Responses

- Responding to teacher questions honestly and in detail
- Describing the teacher as someone who is interested in them

Extra Support

- Beginning a teacher-student conference by providing information about your own life and interests

Extension

- Asking students to identify interests or perspectives they would like to investigate in more depth

Tips for Student-Teacher Conferences

Before the Conference

1. Decide how you would like to schedule student-teacher conferences. A teacher could set aside a class period at the beginning or end of a unit, semester, or year to meet with students or create timeslots before and after school as well as during free periods for which students can sign up when convenient. A teacher should take care to verbally remind students about their appointments when he or she sees them during class.
2. Explain the purpose of conferences to students. A teacher should emphasize that the student-teacher conferences are an opportunity to better know each student and to check in academically. Reiterate that the meetings are to focus on the positive rather than the negative and also allow students an opportunity to voice their own concerns.
3. Consider where the conferences will be held and how long (approximately) each conference should last. If a teacher has set aside a class period to meet with students, determine the location that the conferences will be held (in the classroom, an open room, the hallway, and so on) and what students will do when they are not meeting with the teacher. If necessary, find another teacher to watch the class during individual student-teacher conferences and provide him or her with activities to engage students.

Understanding Students' Backgrounds and Interests

4. Organize and review academic materials for each student. Create a portfolio for each student that contains relevant assignments, assessments, and grades. A teacher should also create a list of topics that he or she wants to address with the student and write down thoughts related to each. Topics may include student progress, strengths, weaknesses, growth goals, opportunities, expectations, challenges, and concerns.
5. Consider questions about students' backgrounds and interests that could be asked during the conference. Because individual student-teacher conferences provide a rare opportunity to speak one-on-one with students, a teacher should take the opportunity to consider what he or she would like to know about each student and use the conferences as a way to strengthen relationships with each student.

During the Conference

1. Begin the conference by giving an overview of where the student stands academically and behaviorally. Focus on positive aspects of the student and provide examples of notable work the student has done. Use concrete examples of the student's past work or behaviors to reinforce each point. If the student has questions, be prepared to explain how scores (particularly those that may be lower than the student expected) were generated.
2. Allow students to voice their questions and concerns about the class, school, or teacher. Listen to students actively and respond consciously and respectfully. If the answer to a question is unknown, the teacher should plan to follow-up with the student within a week. Particularly if a student seems heated or upset, remain sympathetic and objective in tone, even if the comments the student is making are directed negatively at the teacher.
3. Find out information about students' backgrounds. Ask students about their strengths, weaknesses, needs, learning style, goals, and so on. Also, take the opportunity to ask students about their lives outside of school—this may include any part-time jobs, family support available, hobbies, extracurricular activities, siblings, interests, and so on. A teacher should take care to write down such information so it can inform later instruction and interactions.
4. Talk about areas that the student needs to work on. Have specific examples ready to illustrate these areas. Ask the student what he or she can personally do to improve in these areas, then ask the student about supports he or she may need from the teacher. Consider the tone of this segment of the conference and make sure that the conversation does not come off too critically, but rather as an opportunity for a student to grow academically or socially.
5. Create action plans with students if necessary. Identify short-term and long-term goals related to areas that could be improved upon, how such goals can be achieved, and commitments on the part of both the teacher and the student. Decide upon the necessity and frequency of progress check-ins as well as the availability of extra supports.

Understanding Students' Backgrounds and Interests

After the Conference

1. Remind students in class that you are available to address questions or concerns, and provide information about how they can contact you or times available for additional meetings if necessary. If specific information or resources were promised during student-teacher conferences, follow up in a timely fashion.
2. Follow up with students who missed their conferences and determine a time to reschedule.
3. Reach out to students as necessary outside of class-wide student-teacher conferences. Particularly for students with whom an action plan was created or students who need extra support, find additional times to meet throughout the year.

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Parent-teacher conferences are a great opportunity for teachers to build relationships with their students' parents or guardians. They also provide a chance for teachers to better understand students, their backgrounds, and their recent life experiences. During parent-teacher conferences, teachers should keep an ear out for events of note—these might include family events or vacations, transition points for parents or siblings (such as births, deaths, graduations, marriages, divorces, or job changes), and plans to move to a new home or a different school.

Teacher Actions

- Summarizing what is already known about a student prior to meeting with his or her parents
- Preparing questions that elicit critical details about students' recent life experiences in their families (births, deaths, marriages, divorces, job changes, vacations, relocations)

Desired Student Responses

- Telling the teacher about important events in their lives
- Describing the relationship between their parents or guardians and teacher as good

Extra Support

- Marking important student events or transitions on a calendar and asking students about them when they occur

Extension

- Asking students to describe how events or transitions in their lives are affecting their learning at school

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Before the Conference

1. Send out invitations far in advance about parent-teacher conferences, the goals of the meeting, and options for scheduling. Options for dissemination of these materials include flyers and notices sent home by mail or with students, phone calls, emails, or announcements during community meetings.
2. Send out a reminder to parents about a week before the actual conference. The reminder should include the date, time, and location of each conference. You can choose to include a brief agenda for parents if desired.
3. Before the conferences, clean up the classroom and make sure it will be comfortable for incoming parents and guardians. For the meetings themselves, designate a more private or intimate space for the conferences and try to find adult chairs for parents to sit in (if they are not already present in the room).

Understanding Students' Backgrounds and Interests

4. Organize and review materials for each student. Create a portfolio for each student that contains relevant assignments, assessments, and grades. Create a list of topics that you want to address with parents and write down thoughts related to each. Topics may include student progress, strengths, weaknesses, growth goals, opportunities, expectations, challenges, concerns, content to be taught, upcoming school events, or parental support.

During the Conference

1. Begin the conference by giving an overview of where the student stands academically and socially. If parents are unfamiliar, explain how student progress is measured against learning goals. Focus on positive aspects of the student and provide examples of notable work the student has done.
2. Allow parents to voice their questions and concerns. Listen to parents actively and respond consciously and respectfully. If the answer to a question is unknown, tell parents that you will find an answer and follow up in a timely manner after the conference.
3. Find out information about students' backgrounds. Ask parents about what they believe to be their student's strengths, weaknesses, needs, learning style, goals, interests, and so on. Furthermore, ask parents about their goals for their student and the ways in which you can help the student achieve those goals.
4. Talk about areas that the student needs to work on. Have specific examples ready to explain these areas to parents. After noting areas of improvement, explain what actions are being taken in the classroom to help the student and provide ideas for parental support. When talking about at-home supports, make sure to avoid language that might be perceived as accusatory toward the parents. Focus on using "we" instead of "they" or "you."
5. Create action plans with parents when possible. If parents seem receptive to creating at-home supports for students, make commitments regarding what actions will be taken, how long such actions will last, and how often progress check-ins will occur. Determine preferred methods of communication (for example, phone calls, emails, letters home, and so on).

After the Conference

1. Thank parents who attended parent-teacher conferences either by phone or by note. Remind them that you are available to address questions or concerns they may have, and provide contact information. If you promised to provide specific information or resources during the parent-teacher conference, send that information promptly.
2. Follow-up with parents who did not attend parent-teacher conferences and ask if they are interested in meeting at an alternative time. Ask about preferences for communication to have on hand, even if they are not interested in meeting in person.
3. Continue to stay in touch with parents throughout the year. Notify them of opportunities for students and for parents as they come up. Furthermore, communicate and celebrate students' successes with parents when possible.

School Newspaper, Newsletter, or Bulletin

Many schools have publications, either for students or for parents, that showcase students' notable achievements. Teachers can read these publications to become aware of students' involvement in athletic events (such as track or swim meets; basketball, baseball, football, or other games; and awards ceremonies), debates, club events, school performances, and volunteer activities. Teachers can also create their own classroom newspapers, newsletters, or bulletins to send home to parents. Teachers could choose to showcase a few students per issue and ask them to volunteer information about their interests, goals, and accomplishments. Once aware of students' achievements, either through reading or compiling newsletters, the teacher can mention them to students to show that they are on the teacher's radar.

Teacher Actions

- Identifying school publications that contain information about students' involvement in athletic events, clubs, performances, or community activities
- Scheduling time to read selected school publications each week
- Noting students' achievements and upcoming events

Desired Student Responses

- Describing the teacher as someone who knows about their activities
- Telling the teacher about activities they are involved in

Extra Support

- Asking students whose names and activities do not appear in a school publication what they are involved in

Extension

- Asking students to briefly report to the class about the success of events they were involved in

Creating A Classroom Newsletter

When creating a classroom newsletter, teachers should consider including the following information.

- **Featured student section:** Choose a few students each month and ask them to fill out a questionnaire that asks academic, personal, and silly questions. For example, academic questions might include, What has been your favorite project to date this year? What's your favorite subject? What work are you most proud of? Personal questions might include, How many siblings do you have? What are the names of your pets? What's your favorite book? Finally, silly questions might include, If you could have a superpower, what would it be? Would you rather have a year's supply of cookies or a year's supply of ice cream? If you had a time machine, when would you travel to? Compile students' answers to a few of these questions and publish them in the newsletter.

Understanding Students' Backgrounds and Interests

- **Upcoming Events:** Provide a little bit of information about events on the horizon. Events addressed could include tests, long-term assignments, field trips, birthdays, holidays, sporting events, or other events that may hold importance for students.
- **Previous Events:** Similar to upcoming events, teachers can use newsletters and newspapers to address events that have already occurred. Teachers might want to congratulate students on finishing testing, address a behavioral issue that occurred, or recap the results of extra-curricular events.
- **Quotations:** Incorporate quotations into a classroom newsletter. Quotations could be inspiring quotes from famous people or humorous quotes from students.
- **Questions:** Place a questions section in the newsletter that addresses frequently asked questions on the part of students or parents (especially before a special event like a field trip). Alternatively, the teacher could designate a question box in his or her classroom and let students write questions and submit them. The teacher could draw a few questions for each issue and answer them.
- **Classroom rules and procedures:** Use the newsletter to post changes to rules and procedures, to remind students of existing rules and procedures, or to explain or clarify new rules and procedures as needed. Teachers can also feature a rule or procedure in each issue and emphasize its importance, what it looks like when adhered to, and why it was created.
- **Content:** Incorporate academic content into the newsletter or bulletin. This can be done in numerous ways: (1) provide fun or interesting facts about the content, (2) provide an overview of what the class will be covering in the upcoming weeks, (3) provide a review of what the class has previously covered, or (4) list student learning goals being addressed.

Informal Class Interviews

Informal class interviews occur when a teacher asks students to share information about what is happening at school or in their lives that the teacher should be aware of. The teacher asks specific questions that prompt students to talk about their lives. For example, before starting direct instruction on a Monday, the teacher might ask the class to share what they did over the weekend. Alternatively, if students seem particularly unsettled or fidgety before a class period, the teacher might ask students directly about their behavior and if there is a root cause for their distraction.

Teacher Actions

- Preparing questions that prompt students to describe what is happening in their lives
- Preparing questions that prompt students to describe what students are talking about that teachers should be aware of

Desired Student Responses

- Sharing information about important student events and topics with the teacher
- Describing the teacher as someone who understands students

Extra Support

- Focusing informal class interviews on various subgroups represented in a class (social groups, racial groups, interest groups) for whom little information has been previously provided

Extension

- Attending school functions that students attend (pep rallies, athletics games, dances or social functions)

Example Informal Class Interview Questions to Start Class

- How is everyone doing so far today?
- How was everyone's weekend?
- What are you doing over the weekend? Anyone have exciting plans?
- What are you most looking forward to in the upcoming month?
- What were your thoughts on the homework for last night? Was it difficult?
- Did anyone see [television show] last night? What did you think?
- Who watched [school or professional sporting event]? What did you think of the game?
- Did anything eventful happen at [class or lunch period]?
- How would you describe your current mood? Why?
- How would you describe your current energy level? Why?
- Does anyone have an important event coming up this week the class should know about?
- Does anyone have plans for [holiday or day off]? What are they?

Investigating Student Culture

The teacher talks with students and becomes familiar with popular cultural phenomena students are interested in. This may include popular music, movies, television shows, and specific actors, singers, or bands. The teacher can also become familiar with specific local events that draw large student attendance and popular places where students often gather outside of school hours. The teacher can also pay attention to the slang terms and phrases students use, and either look up their meaning on the Internet or directly ask students about their meaning. The teacher may also seek to understand existing social dynamics within the school and how his or her students fit into these dynamics.

Teacher Actions

- Becoming familiar with popular recording artists and their works
- Noticing popular places where students like to gather
- Taking note of local events that are significant to students
- Being aware of rivalries between different groups of students
- Noticing popular terms and phrases students use

Desired Student Responses

- Sharing information about student culture with the teacher
- Describing the teacher as someone who understands students

Extra Support

- Investigating elements of student culture associated with various subgroups in a class (social groups, racial groups, interest groups)

Extension

- Asking students to explain a specific aspect of their culture using media of their choice (written composition, music, art, film, drama)

Investigating Student Culture

When I'm not in school, I like to go to:

My favorite local event is:

My favorite musician(s) I like to listen to is/are:

The most popular song right now is: _____

My favorite movie I saw this year was: _____

My favorite television show is: _____

I think my group of friends could best be described as:

These are current slang words I think everyone should know:

Autobiographical Metaphors and Analogies

Students construct metaphors that compare academic content with their own lives. These can be simple and concrete, or they can involve more complex patterns and processes. This strategy is helpful, as it provides a teacher with knowledge about students' backgrounds while simultaneously strengthening students' understanding of the content. Students can also construct analogies between the content and their lives. These may or may not accompany nonlinguistic representations. For example, a fifth grade teacher, during a unit on the solar system, might ask students to create metaphors that relate what they have been taught thus far to their own lives. A student might compare members of his family to various celestial bodies (for example, my mother is like the sun because she controls our movement and makes sure everyone gets where they need to go), which strengthens the student's understanding of the unique characteristics of objects in the solar system while giving the teacher a glimpse at the student's familial relationships.

Teacher Actions

- Asking students to compare their lives to the content being studied
- Asking students to express comparisons between their lives and the content as metaphors
- Asking students to identify relationships between academic content and their lives
- Asking students to express relationships between their lives and the content as analogies

Desired Student Responses

- Creating metaphors that express comparisons between the content and their lives
- Creating analogies that express relationships between the content and their lives

Extra Support

- Showing students examples of autobiographical metaphors and analogies written by previous students

Extension

- Asking students to make generalizations about themselves based on their autobiographical metaphors and analogies

Autobiographical Metaphors and Analogies Worksheet

Name: _____

Class: _____

_____ (something in my life) is
like _____ (content) because

_____ .

_____ (something in my life) is
like _____ (content) because:

_____ .

The content being taught relates to my life because:

The content being taught is important for me to learn because:

Metaphor: _____ is _____ .

Analogy: _____ is to _____ as
_____ is to _____

Six-Word Autobiographies

Six-word autobiographies are by no means new. Perhaps most famously, Ernest Hemingway, when asked to write a story in six words, wrote: *For sale: baby shoes, never worn*. Students can also write autobiographies of themselves in exactly six words, and the teacher can lead a discussion in which students share and explain their biographies. The six-word autobiographies can be either a disparate list of six words (particularly for younger students) or a functioning sentence. For example, a student in elementary school might create the following six-word biography: *silly, nice, loves running and animals*. This student might have considered these four characteristics as most important to understand his or her temperament. As students get older, however, the teacher might put a restriction on the assignment so that the autobiographies function more as a sentence. For example, older students might create the following six-word biographies: *School is fine; weekends are better* or *At least I think math's cool*. Such autobiographies can show a lot about a student's temperament and give students an opportunity to distinguish themselves from one another.

Teacher Actions

- Creating or identifying examples of effective six-word autobiographies and sharing them with students
- Asking students to create an autobiography in six words
- Asking students to create posters for their six-word autobiographies
- Discussing students' six-word autobiographies with the class

Desired Student Responses

- Explaining why they chose specific words or phrases for their autobiographies
- Creating posters for their autobiographies that communicate multiple messages about themselves (conveyed through literal meaning, visual design, and inferred or implied meanings)

Extra Support

- Showing students examples of six-word biographies written by previous students

Extension

- Asking students to make and present biography bags (collections of belongings and items that help students explain who they are and what is important to them)

Resources for Six-Word Autobiographies

- Smith Magazine (Ed.). (2009). *I can't keep my own secrets: Six-word memoirs by teens famous and obscure*. New York City: HarperTeen.
- Saunders, J. M., & Smith, E. E. (2014). Every word is on trial: Six-word memoirs in the classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 67(8), 600–605.
- www.smithmag.net/schools/
- www.smithmag.net/share/pdf/six-word-teachers-guide-first-book.pdf
- www.smithmag.net/share/pdf/six-word-teachers-guide-teen-book.pdf
- www.sixwordmemoirs.com/schools/
- www.brainpickings.org/2013/01/09/six-word-memoirs-students/

Independent Investigations

Independent investigations allow students to research a topic of interest to them, then report back to the class about what they have found and learned. These investigations can be related to content being taught or driven by students' nonacademic interests. For example, a teacher might ask students to choose one aspect of the content to research further (for homework or during part of a class period), then bring students back together to share what they have learned. During this discussion, the teacher should query students about why they chose their topics and how the topics are relevant to their backgrounds or interests.

Teacher Actions

- Helping students identify a topic that interests them
- Asking students to investigate their topic of interest and report back to the class
- Discussing students' findings with the class and how they connect to students' backgrounds or interests

Desired Student Responses

- Identifying and investigating topics that interest them
- Presenting their research to the class in an interesting way
- Explaining why topics interest them and how they connect to students' backgrounds or interests

Extra Support

- Encouraging students to select reporting methods that they prefer (written or oral, live or recorded) to report the results of their independent investigations

Extension

- Asking students to make generalizations about the subject of their investigations based on their findings

Independent Investigations

Name: _____ Date: _____

Topic: _____

Three new things I learned about this topic from my investigation are:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Something interesting I learned about this topic:

This topic is important to the content being taught because:

I think this topic is interesting because:

This topic relates to my life because:

Quotes

Collecting and sharing quotes can be a fun way to better understand the personalities and interests of students. A teacher can ask students in the class to collect quotes that they feel express their personality traits, interests, or aspirations, then have students share the quotes they have found. When discussing quotes, the teacher should make sure that students connect the reason they chose the quote to the quote itself. A teacher can model this strategy by sharing with the class quotes that he or she finds representative of the class, the content, or the teacher him- or herself.

Teacher Actions

- Finding examples of quotes that express different personality traits or interests and sharing them with students
- Asking students to find quotes that describe their personalities and interests
- Discussing student-presented quotes with the class

Desired Student Responses

- Sharing quotes that are personally relevant
- Explaining why they think specific quotes represent their personalities or interests

Extra Support

- Sharing examples of quotes that previous students selected to describe themselves

Extension

- Asking students to investigate the authors of their quotes and compare the authors' lives to their own

Resources for Quotation Collection

There are many websites on the Internet that provide libraries of quotations that can be searched or browsed by subject or author. A few such websites are listed below.

- www.quotationspage.com
- www.quotegarden.com
- www.brainyquote.com
- www.quoto.com
- www.thinkexist.com
- www.wikiquote.com
- www.searchquotes.com

Commenting on Student Achievement or Areas of Importance

Once a teacher has some background knowledge about students' values and interests, he or she can notice and comment on individual accomplishments and important events in their lives. In terms of individual accomplishments, a teacher might point out students' achievements in clubs or athletics, academic recognitions, artistic and dramatic accomplishments, or assignments done well. When commenting on important events in students' lives, the teacher should notice important events—such as weddings, vacations, birthdays, and so on—and changes in students' families—such as a move, birth, death, marriage, divorce, or transition in employment.

Teacher Actions

- Noticing individual students' accomplishments in school, outside of school, and in their families
- Making comments to students about their accomplishments
- Noticing events that are important to individual students in school, outside of school, and in their families
- Making comments to students about important events in their lives

Desired Student Responses

- Sharing information about achievements and interests with the teacher
- Describing the teacher as someone who knows how they are doing

Extra Support

- Keeping track of how often students receive recognition and seeking out and acknowledging the accomplishments of seldom-recognized students

Extension

- Asking students how they prefer to be recognized (certificate, social recognition, one-on-one recognition, recommendation)

Technology Tips

- Create a class Edmodo page or website and have students create pages that reflect their interests, backgrounds, and life events. Comment on notable student achievements or events when possible.

Understanding Students' Backgrounds and Interests

Potential Areas of Achievement or Importance to Students

In-School Achievements	Achievements Outside of School	Important Events
Achievements in other classes Assignments done well High-quality presentations Roles in class (leader, helper, facilitator) Student government Achievements in clubs or athletics Academic recognitions Artistic or dramatic accomplishments	Community service Volunteering Socially responsible actions Awards received Participation in events outside of school	Changes in parents' jobs Changes in family structures (births, deaths, marriages, divorces) Vacations

Lineups

A teacher can use specific questions that ask students to line up or sit in groups in ways that reveal their likes, dislikes, and preferences. Questions can be silly and serve as a fun activity to get to know the personalities of students, academically oriented and help the teacher better understand students' learning preferences, or both. For example, the teacher might ask a silly question in the form of "Would you rather . . . ?" and designate one side of the classroom to represent one answer to the question and the other side of the classroom to represent the other. Following a silly question, the teacher could include a more serious question about learning preferences by reading a statement such as "I prefer to work in groups" and using the four corners of the room to represent the answers *I strongly agree, I agree, I disagree, and I strongly disagree.*

Teacher Actions

- Creating questions that elicit students' likes, dislikes, and preferences
- Asking students to line up or sit in groups according to their likes, dislikes, and preferences

Desired Student Responses

- Treating other students respectfully during lineups
- Describing the teacher as someone who wants to know them better

Extra Support

- Using questions for lineups that take into account different ethnic and socioeconomic cultural norms

Extension

- Allowing students to suggest questions to use for lineups (be sure to screen these questions for appropriateness before using them)

Sentence Stems for Lineups

- Would you rather _____ or _____?
- Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? _____.
- To what extent do you agree with the following statement? _____.
Strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree.
- How often do you _____? Never, rarely, sometimes, often, or always.
- How difficult is _____ for you? Difficult, neutral, or easy.
- Which of the following words best represents you: _____,
_____, _____, or _____?
- Which of the following is your favorite: _____, _____,
_____, or _____?
- Stand here if you like _____ and stand here if you don't like it.

Individual Student Learning Goals

Students identify something that interests them during instruction and create their own personalized learning goals during a unit. The teacher should help students connect their personalized learning goals to teacher-identified learning goals. Students can state their learning goals in the following formats.

- When this unit is completed, I will better understand _____.
- When this unit is completed, I will be able to _____.

Students use the following scale to track their progress on individual learning goals.

Student Self-Assessment Scale for Individual Learning Goals

4 = I did even better than the goal I set.
3 = I accomplished my goal.
2 = I didn't accomplish everything I wanted to, but I learned quite a bit.
1 = I tried, but I didn't really learn much.
0 = I didn't really try to accomplish my goal.

Teacher Actions

- Identifying students' personal interests that relate to the class's learning goal
- Helping students articulate and write down their individual learning goals
- Tracking students' progress on individual learning goals

Desired Student Responses

- Identifying personally important individual learning goals
- Explaining what they have already done and still need to do to accomplish individual learning goals
- Tracking their progress on individual learning goals

Extra Support

- Conduct individual interviews with students who are having trouble identifying their interests or connecting their interests to the learning goal

Extension

- Asking students to give a presentation to the class at the end of a unit explaining what they learned by studying their individual learning goal

Technology Tips

- Students can use electronic journals or film or audio recording software to track and reflect upon their progress toward individual learning goals, their learning preferences, new skills being practiced, and effort invested in learning the new content.

Individual Student Learning Goals

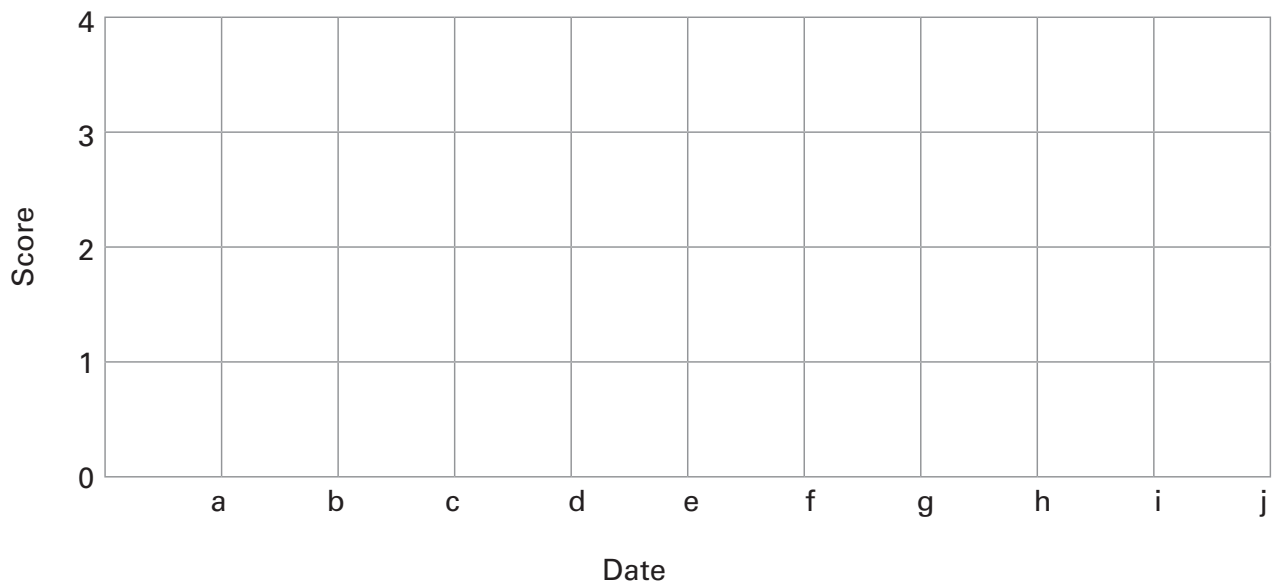
Name: _____

Student-identified Learning Goal: _____

Initial Score: _____

Goal Score: _____ by _____ (date)

Specific things I am going to do to improve: _____



a. _____	f. _____
b. _____	g. _____
c. _____	h. _____
d. _____	i. _____
e. _____	j. _____

4	3	2	1	0
I did even better than the goal I set.	I accomplished my goal.	I didn't accomplish everything I wanted to, but I learned quite a bit.	I tried, but I didn't really learn much.	I didn't really try to accomplish my goal.

REPRODUCIBLES

Teachers can use the following reproducibles to monitor their implementation of this element. The reproducible titled Tracking Progress Over Time helps teachers set goals related to their proficiency with this element and track their progress toward these goals over the course of a unit, semester, or year. Tracking Teacher Actions and Tracking Student Responses allow observers in classrooms to monitor specific teacher and student behavior related to this element. Teachers themselves can also use the Tracking Student Responses reproducible to document instances of student behaviors during class. The Strategy Reflection Log provides teachers a space to write down their thoughts and reflect on the implementation process for specific strategies related to this element. Finally, this section provides both a student survey and a teacher survey, the results of which provide feedback about teachers' proficiency with this element.

Tracking Progress Over Time

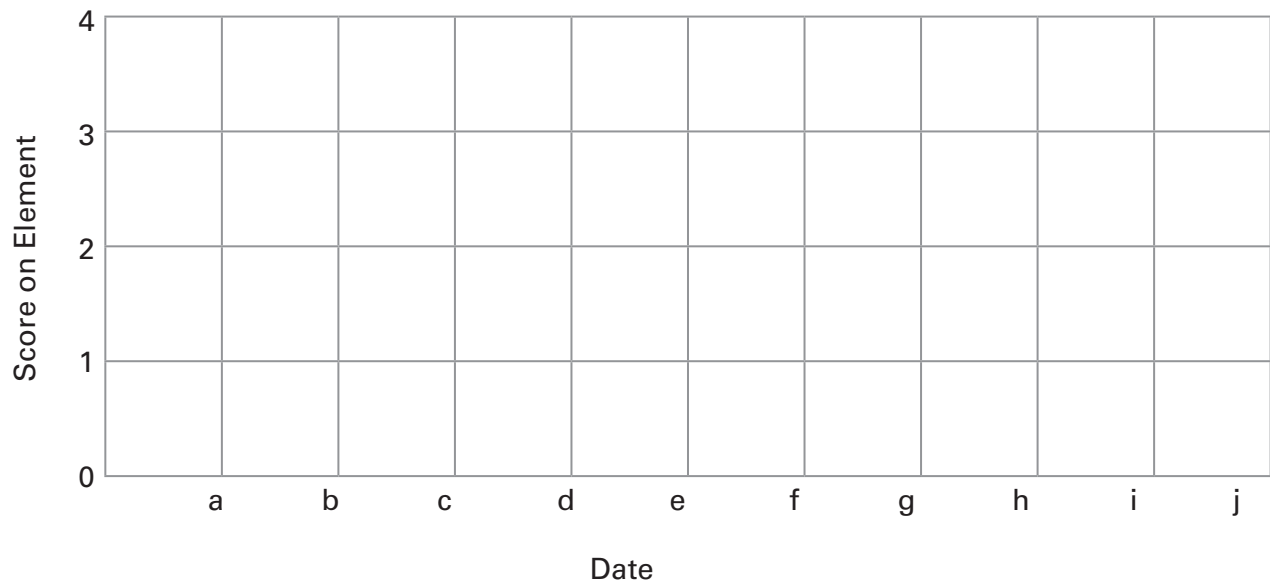
Use this worksheet to set a goal for your use of this element, make a plan for increasing your mastery, and chart your progress toward your goal.

Element: _____

Initial Score: _____

Goal Score: _____ by _____ (date)

Specific things I am going to do to improve: _____



a. _____

f. _____

b. _____

g. _____

c. _____

h. _____

d. _____

i. _____

e. _____

j. _____

Tracking Teacher Actions

During an observation, the observer can use this form to record the teacher's usage of strategies related to the element of understanding students' backgrounds and interests.

Observation Date and Time: _____ Length of Observation: _____

Check Strategies You Intend to Use	Strategies	Description of What Was Observed
	Student Background Surveys	
	Opinion Questionnaires	
	Individual Student-Teacher Conferences	
	Parent-Teacher Conferences	
	School Newspaper, Newsletter, or Bulletin	
	Informal Class Interviews	
	Investigating Student Culture	

	Autobiographical Metaphors and Analogies	
	Six-Word Autobiographies	
	Independent Investigations	
	Quotes	
	Commenting on Student Achievement or Areas of Importance	
	Lineups	
	Individual Student Learning Goals	
	Other:	
	Other:	

Tracking Student Responses

A teacher or observer can use this worksheet to record instances of student behavior to inform planning and implementation of strategies associated with understanding students' backgrounds and interests. Any item followed by an asterisk is an example of undesirable behavior related to the element; the teacher should look for a decrease in the number of instances of these items.

Observation Date and Time: _____ Length of Observation: _____

Behavior	Number of Instances
Describing the teacher as someone who is interested in them	
Describing the teacher as someone who knows them	
Saying that the teacher doesn't know about or isn't interested in them*	
Providing information about their backgrounds and interests	
Responding to the teacher's questions enthusiastically	
Responding to the teacher's questions unenthusiastically*	
Informing the teacher of important life events and activities	
Explaining how content relates to their lives	
Other:	
Other:	

Strategy Reflection Log

Use this worksheet to select a strategy, set a goal, and reflect on your use of that strategy.

Element: _____

Strategy: _____

Goal: _____

Date	How did it go?

Student Survey for Understanding Students' Backgrounds and Interests

1. My teacher wants to know about the things I am interested in.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
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2. My teacher knows what my life is like outside of school.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------------------	-------	----------------

3. I feel accepted and safe at school.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------------------	-------	----------------

4. My teacher asks me about my activities outside of school.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------------------	-------	----------------

5. My teacher greets me every day and asks me how I am doing.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------------------	-------	----------------

6. My teacher thinks I am interesting.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------------------	-------	----------------

Teacher Survey for Understanding Students' Backgrounds and Interests

1. I know a little bit about each student's background and interests.

Often Sometimes Rarely Never I don't know

2. I build information about students' backgrounds and interests into lessons.

Often Sometimes Rarely Never I don't know

3. I have discussions with students about topics they are interested in.

Often Sometimes Rarely Never I don't know

4. I give students surveys that inform me about their personal lives and academic interests.

Often Sometimes Rarely Never I don't know

5. When applicable, I comment on students' achievements or areas of importance in their lives.

Often Sometimes Rarely Never I don't know

6. I find time to meet with students individually.

Often Sometimes Rarely Never I don't know

7. I give students the opportunity to connect the content we are learning to their own lives.

Often Sometimes Rarely Never I don't know