

Shared Understanding of Course Assignments

How might we increase the shared understanding of the purpose and meaning of courses and course assignments?



The Problem Landscape

A persistent gap often exists between what instructors intend an assignment to accomplish and the value students see in it. When students don't see a clear connection between an assignment and their goals, they dismiss it as busy work and invest less effort. GenAI has made this gap newly consequential: when students don't see the value of a task, they now have a frictionless way to outsource it. This problem is addressed by redesigning tasks, and communicating their purpose clearly.

Why does this problem exist?

- Expectancy-value theory explains that students' willingness to engage depends on their expectation of success and the value they assign to the task — across dimensions of intrinsic interest, personal importance, utility for future goals, and perceived value-to-cost. When any of these is low, motivation drops and offloading becomes the path of least resistance.
- Research confirms the pattern: students use GenAI most heavily on tasks they perceive as busy work. The appropriate first response is to ask whether the assignment deserves students' investment — and if not, to redesign it, not try to better sell something that isn't valuable.
- A recent survey found 67% of students ages 12–29 endorsed the statement that heavy GenAI use harms their critical thinking skills — up more than 10 percentage points in just ten months. Students are worried about their own learning but often lack the guidance to act on that concern.

What makes it hard to address?

- Not all assignments are genuinely well-designed. Some tasks that once served a purpose have become exercises that produce output without building capability. In K–12 settings, many instructors are bound by scripted vendor curricula with low-level tasks that compounds this.
- Even when assignments are well-designed, the reasoning behind them is often implicit. Research consistently shows students are more likely to engage with — and respect restrictions on — tasks for which they understand the purpose.
- Students and instructors often operate from different framings: instructors think in terms of skill development, students in terms of task completion. In required courses where students didn't choose the subject, these gaps compound significantly.



What does promising practice look like?

- Utility-value interventions that ask students to write about how course material connects to their own lives and goals show consistent, significant effects on interest, engagement, and performance across high school and college settings. Student-generated connections are more effective than instructor-communicated rationales.
- Participatory approaches that position students as co-designers of learning experiences — rather than passive recipients — increase motivation, metacognition, and sense of ownership. Students are more likely to invest in tasks they helped shape and whose purpose they understand.

Example Approaches

This packet includes four design sketches — synthesized from research and inspired by documented classroom practice. They are starting points to adapt, combine, or set aside. All would require careful adaptation to educational context, purpose, and student developmental level.

Example 1: The “Why This Assignment?” Dialogue Protocol

Setting: High school and college (assignment level)

Before launching a major assignment, the instructor shares a brief written statement of its developmental purpose — not just what students will produce, but what cognitive skill the assignment is designed to build. Students respond to three prompts: What is this assignment trying to help you learn? What feels relevant or valuable, and what doesn’t? If you could change one thing to make it more meaningful while building the same skill, what would you change? The instructor reviews responses and makes at least one visible modification before the assignment begins. The cycle repeats for each major assignment, creating an iterative feedback loop across the semester.

Example 2: “Hack the Assignment” — Student-Led Redesign for Authenticity

Setting: High school and college (assignment level)

Students are given a traditional assignment prompt and asked to “hack” it: working in small groups, they identify the cognitive skill embedded in the original, then co-design an alternative that preserves the skill-building purpose while shifting the format, context, or product in ways that increase its relevance to their interests, goals, or real-world applications. Through structured peer feedback, groups refine their designs with particular attention to why their version would feel more worthwhile. The instructor synthesizes across proposals to create a menu of assignment options, positioning students as designers rather than consumers of their education.

Example 3: The “Why Are We Here?” Course-Level Meaning-Making Activity

Setting: College (especially general education and large enrollment required courses); adaptable for high school

In the first week, the instructor facilitates a structured meaning-making activity. Students write their best guess at why the course is required and what capabilities it’s designed to build. After small-group sharing, the instructor presents the actual developmental rationale — including what students from prior semesters have said about how the course ended up mattering to them. Students then write a brief connection statement linking at least one course goal to something they personally care about. These statements are revisited and updated at midterm and end of semester.

Example 4: The AI Process Audit (Post-Assignment Reflection)

Setting: High school and college (post-assignment; complements any of the above)

After submission of an assignment, students label each component of their work as: completed entirely by them, AI-assisted with a description of how, or substantially AI-generated. For each component, they answer one question: “Why did you make that choice?” The response must reference the assignment’s stated learning purpose. The instructor reviews a sample of audits, shares anonymized patterns with the class and reflects on the parts of the assignment that feel valuable. This feedback loop that informs future assignment design. Grading is based on the thoughtfulness of reflection, not on whether AI was used. Requires a trust-based classroom culture.

This is a summary of the full Resource Packet. The full packet is available on request. The packet contains an expanded description of potential approaches, limitations and contextual considerations, research citations, and a tools & templates section.