



Connection Catalyst Assignments

For Human Connection and AI Literacy

Core Principle: Connection isn't the container for learning—it *is* the learning.

The challenge: Human connection is a basic biological need that is increasingly unmet in our students' lives. Loneliness among young people has reached crisis levels, and many are turning to AI companions to fill the void. As educators, we have an opportunity—and perhaps an obligation—to design learning experiences that foster genuine human connection while building critical AI literacy.

The Five Phases

Phase 1: AI-Assisted Preparation

Students use AI to build background knowledge and develop interview questions.

- Prompt AI for open-ended questions that invite storytelling
- Research context and background on the topic
- Critique and revise AI suggestions based on knowledge of their specific interviewee

Phase 2: The Human Encounter

Students engage in genuine dialogue with a person: family member, community member, professional, or peer.

- 30-45 minute recorded conversation (with permission)
- No phones during the conversation
- Follow questions but allow the conversation to wander

Phase 3: Individual Reflection

Students analyze the gap between AI preparation and human encounter.

- What surprised you?
- What did you learn that AI couldn't have told you?
- Describe a moment of genuine connection—what made it possible?
- How were you changed by this encounter?

Phase 4: Artifact Creation

Students produce evidence of the encounter—something that couldn't exist without the human interaction.

- Knowledge Portrait: quote, photo, context, reflection
- Policy + Person Brief: research summary paired with lived experience
- Hidden Curriculum Document: what the profession requires that never appears in a syllabus

Phase 5: Collective Sense-Making (Connection Circle)

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Students share experiences in small groups, identify patterns, and synthesize insights as a class.

Face-to-Face / Synchronous	Asynchronous Online (Canvas)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small Groups (20-25 min) • Each person shares (2-3 min timed) • Pattern ID (10-12 min) • Groups identify trends in AI, connection, transformation • Whole-Class Synthesis (15-20 min) • Groups share patterns; class discusses emerging themes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step 1 (Days 1-3): Individual posts in small group discussion • Step 2 (Days 3-5): Witnessing replies to 2+ peers • Step 3 (Days 5-6): Group synthesis post identifying patterns • Step 4 (Days 6-8): Whole-class discussion thread • Step 5: Instructor reflection (announcement or video)

Supporting Resources

Sample AI Prompts for Students (Phase 1):

Provide these starter prompts to help students use AI effectively in Phase 1:

- *"Help me develop open-ended questions that invite storytelling rather than yes/no answers."*
- *"I'm interviewing someone who [context]. What background knowledge would help me listen well?"*
- *"Here are my draft questions. Which ones sound leading or judgmental? How might I revise them?"*
- *"What are common experiences of [population/context] that I should be sensitive to?"*

5 Keys to Active Listening (Phase 2)

Prepare students for meaningful encounters by teaching these essential listening skills:

1. Pay attention. Give undivided attention. Put aside distracting thoughts. "Listen" to body language.
2. Show that you are listening. Nod occasionally. Smile. Use open posture. Encourage with "yes" and "aha."
3. Provide feedback. Paraphrase: "What I'm hearing is..." Ask clarifying questions. Summarize periodically.
4. Defer judgment. Allow the speaker to finish. Don't interrupt with counter arguments.
5. Respond appropriately. Be candid, open, and honest. Assert opinions respectfully. Treat others as they wish to be treated.

Source: MindTools.com

Collective Sense-Making Questions (Phase 5)

Guide students to identify trends across their collective experiences:

AI Literacy Patterns	Connection Patterns	Transformation Patterns
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What did AI help us do well?• Where did AI fall short?• What can't AI predict or prepare us for?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What contributed to connection?• What got in the way?• What surprised us?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How were we changed?• What do we understand now that we didn't before?• What will we carry forward?

Assignment Examples Across Disciplines

Assignment Type	Description	Disciplines
Generational Knowledge Interview	Interview family member or elder about a topic connected to course content	History, Sociology, Ethnic Studies, Psychology, any humanities
Community Problem Dialogue	Talk with someone directly affected by a local issue (not an expert—a person living the reality)	Political Science, Public Health, Business, Social Work, Urban Planning
Disciplinary Mentor Conversation	Interview a working professional about the human dimensions of the work—not career advice, but what the field asks of you as a person	Nursing, Engineering, CTE, Business, any career-focused program
Peer Teaching Exchange	Teach a course concept to someone outside class, then interview them about the learning experience	STEM, Mathematics, any content-heavy course
Values Clarification Dialogue	Have structured conversations with two people who hold different views on a contested question	Ethics, Philosophy, Political Science, any course addressing values

The Big Idea

AI can help students prepare for human encounters. It cannot *be* the encounter. When students use AI to prepare meaningful questions and then sit across from another human being who surprises them, moves them, changes them, they learn something about both AI and humanity that no lecture could teach.

Assessment Approach

Assess process and engagement, not the profundity of the encounter:

- Did the student engage authentically in AI-assisted preparation or share critical reflection about why AI was not used?
- Is there evidence that the human encounter took place?
- Does the reflection demonstrate genuine engagement with the gap between AI and human?
- Did the student contribute meaningfully to collective sense-making?

Tips for Instructors

Start small. You don't need to redesign your entire course. Start with one assignment:

- Identify one concept or topic that could come alive through human encounter
- Ask: Who could students talk to about this? Family? Community members? Professionals?
- Build in explicit AI use for preparation—and explicit reflection on AI's limits
- Create space for students to share what they learned with each other

Build trust first.

The relational groundwork you lay before the assignment often matters as much as the assignment itself. When students trust you and feel supported, they're more likely to take the risk of genuine connection—with you, with their interviewee, and with their classmates.

Before launching a Connection Catalyst Assignment, take time to build the relational foundation that makes this work possible by incorporating the [Eight Elements of Humanized Online Teaching](#).

Teach Active Listening.

Many students have never been explicitly taught how to listen well. Before sending them into interviews, spend time practicing active listening skills in class. This isn't a distraction from content—it *is* content. Students who learn to listen deeply will conduct better interviews, build stronger relationships, and develop skills that transfer far beyond your course.

Consider designing time with students to:

- Modeling active listening by demonstrating the five keys (pay attention, show you're listening, provide feedback, defer judgment, respond appropriately)
- Practicing in pairs with low-stakes prompts before the high-stakes interview
- Discussing what makes someone feel truly heard —and what gets in the way
- Reflecting on students' own experiences of being listened to (or not)

Honor Student Choice and Differences

Important: Be careful not to assume that all students have access to family members or relatives or other specific contacts. Always provide multiple pathways to complete the assignment.

When framing the assignment, explicitly offer choices about who students can interview:

- A family member or elder in their life
- A friend, neighbor, or mentor
- A community member (someone from a local organization, place of worship, workplace, etc.)
- A professional in a field related to the course
- A peer from outside the class (classmate from another course, coworker, roommate)

Make clear that all of these options are equally valid. The assignment is about human connection—not about having a particular kind of family or social network.

For students who struggle to identify anyone to interview, offer to brainstorm together. Some students may benefit from being connected with community partners, campus staff, or professionals you know who are willing to be interviewed.

Invite Students to Come to You

Some students will have concerns. Be intentional about creating welcoming spaces for private conversations by:

- Explicitly inviting questions via email, office hours, or appointment
- Offering flexibility for students who need accommodations or alternative approaches
- Following up individually with students who seem hesitant or disengaged

Remember, the goal is connection, not compliance. A student who interviews a coworker they trust has succeeded just as fully as a student who interviews a grandparent. **Meet students where they are.**

Sample Note for Students

Below is a sample message you may adapt and share with students when introducing the assignment. Feel free to modify it to match your voice and context.

Dear Students,

Our upcoming assignment asks you to have a meaningful conversation with one person and bring what you learn back to our class. I want to share a few thoughts before you get started.

First, you have choices. You might interview a family member, but you might also choose a friend, neighbor, mentor, coworker, community member, or professional in a field that interests

you. All of these options are equally valuable. The assignment is about human connection—not about having a particular kind of family or social network. Choose someone you feel comfortable reaching out to and who you're genuinely curious to learn from.

Second, conversations can be emotional. Conversations about meaningful topics can be surprising, moving, or sometimes complicated. That's okay. You don't need to share anything in class that feels too personal, and you can always talk to me privately if something comes up that you're not sure how to handle.

Third, I'm here to help. If you're not sure who to interview, if you're feeling anxious about the assignment, or if you have any questions or concerns at all—please reach out. I'm happy to brainstorm with you, offer suggestions, or talk through anything that's on your mind. You can email me, come to office hours, or schedule a time to meet.

Before the interview, remind yourself how important it is to really listen. Your goal is to be genuinely present. Put away your phone. Make eye contact. Let the conversation wander if something interesting comes up. Ask follow-up questions. The best interviews happen when we're genuinely curious about another person's experience—not just checking boxes.

I'm asking you to do this assignment because I believe that some of the most important things we can learn come from other people—their stories, their experiences, their wisdom. I hope this conversation becomes more than an assignment. I hope it becomes a gift—both for you and for the person you talk with.

Looking forward to hearing what you discover,

[Your name]

"What if every assignment were an opportunity to ask: Who will you be in relationship with as you learn this? And who will you become because of that encounter?"