Course manual Nudging

2025/2026

Course coordinator

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Note: this manual might be subject to change. If so, this will always be communicated with an announcement on Brightspace.

Teachers

- Dr. Jeroen Benjamins
- Prof. dr. Denise de Ridder

Tutorial Teachers

- Dr. Robert Wijers
- Elvan Ibicoglu, M.Sc.
- Dr. Jurriaan te Koppele

Course content

If unhealthy food is placed further away, people will eat less of it; a painted fly in a urinal will prevent men from spilling; and placing trees closer to the edge of a road will reduce driving speed. Small, smart adjustments in the environment that subtly affect people's default choices have demonstrated to yield impressive results in a broad range of behavioral domains. Importantly, this specific intervention strategy, known as nudging, departs from other intervention techniques as it does not rely on persuasion, but makes use of psychological insights showing that people are often not very rational, but rather make impulsive choices ('go with the default'). That is, without interfering with autonomy or freedom of choice, nudges aim to make it easier for people to perform a specific behavior, rather than convince them what is 'right'. Not surprising then, it has recently sparked the interest of policy makers and a large number of public organizations.

This course will focus on the use of nudging as a novel strategy to adapt behavior, with a particular focus on the area of health and well-being. We address the theoretical background of nudges in comparison to other approaches for behavior modification, and incorporate empirical work providing insight into working mechanisms and (boundary conditions for) the effectiveness of nudges. In addition, taking a more practical approach, students will be challenged to think about the design of a nudge, the implementation issues that may come along with it, and the requirements for a proper evaluation of its effectiveness. Finally, the

course will address the topical academic and societal debate about nudging and the role of various institutions in promoting health and well-being, including ethical considerations.

Nudging strategies will be examined in different contexts, including private settings, public spaces, health care, schools and work settings. The course has a strong focus on connecting theory and practice and aims to involve international partners and societal organizations working in the field of health promotion.

Learning goals

At the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Explain, connect and reflect on different theories related to behavior and behavior change strategies
2. Identify relevant criteria for nudges and understand their working mechanisms
3. Distinguish between different categories and types of nudges
4. Recognize different points of view in the academic and societal debate about nudging, and formulate their own standpoints
5. Communicate with relevant parties and develop a nudge to influence behavior in a self-chosen setting

Class meetings

The course consists of seven Fridays plus a final presentation session. Each Friday starts with a 45 minutes lecture at 11.00 - with an exception on 28-11-202; we start at 10:00 that day - followed by an unsupervised tutorial period, typically used for preparation of the following two hours of supervised tutorials. The last course day before the Christmas break is online to facilitate students travelling to family and loved ones for the holidays.

Details lectures:

When	What	By Whom?
14-11-2025	Introduction on Nudges	Jeroen Benjamins
28-11-2025	Dual Systems	Denise de Ridder
5-12-2025	Heuristics	Jeroen Benjamins
12-12-2025	Attention & Perception	Jeroen Benjamins
19-12-2025	Online recap lecture on all things Nudging	Jeroen Benjamins
Christmas Holidays	no class	
9-1-2026	Guest interview	Jeroen Benjamins
16-1-2026	Guest interview / dot the I's session	Jeroen Benjamins

Dr. Jeroen Benjamins and Professor Denise de Ridder are psychologists working at the SelfRegulationLab at the Department of Psychology at Utrecht University (https://www.uu.nl/en/research/self-regulation-lab). They are engaged in a number of research projects on nudging in public health and collaborate with policy makers and

practitioners to determine the effectiveness and working mechanisms of enhancing behavioral change by gentle support.

Information on guest(s)

Dr. Thomas Dirkmaat studied Economics and Law at Utrecht University. He obtained a PhD from the same University in Economics (game theory and experimental economics). In 2009 he started to work for the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs. He has worked on a broad range of topics. He has a strong interest in Evidence Based Policy Making. Since November 2014 he is the coordinator of the Behavioural Insights Team.

Niek Verlaan works at the municipality of Utrecht as an advisor in the Healthy Urban Living team, where he uses his expertise on behavior to create healthier environments in Utrecht. Before that he likewise was involved with behavior change in mobility and a policy advisor on Public Health.

Robert Weijers is assistant professor in the Self-regulation Lab. His research concerns increasing prosocial behavior by promoting collaboration, and implements this in bottom-up citizen initiatives. He also focuses on combating disinformation. He is part of the sector plan Welfare, Participation, and Citizenship in a Digital World

Tutorials

Students work in small groups on designing a nudge for a real world problem. These problems have been created/thought of in collaboration with the Green Office Utrecht, some companies and the municipality of Utrecht, but are fictitious. The idea is that solutions the students come up with to these or similar problems could be implemented at some point in the future by these stakeholders. During the weekly tutorials, progress of this nudge design can be discussed with the teacher as well as with peers. Moreover, students will work on an essay of their nudges. Tutorials will take place at the locations that can be found in MyTimeTable.

Examination

Written exam (50% of final grade) and assignment (50% of final grade). Students need a passing mark (5.5 or higher) on the final grade to pass the course. Next to these parts, you write a short reflection on the guest interviews, which will be assessed as a pass or fail. Passing this eflection is a requirement for receiving the final grade. Your final grade will only be valid once you pass the reflection.

The written exam will be on the literature on Brightspace, the book by Thaler and Sunstein and the lectures (excluding the guest interviews) of this course. Literature is part self-study and will be partly covered in the lectures.

Active participation

Attendance in both lectures and tutorial groups will not be monitored, but consistent participation is strongly encouraged to maximize your learning experience in this course.

Use of generative AI

In this course, you're welcome to use generative AI tools as a source of inspiration and to help with brainstorming or refining your ideas. However, generating and copy-pasting full texts from AI tools is not permitted. Instead, think of generative AI as a writing assistant: use it to explore concepts, gather ideas, or improve your wording, but ensure the final content is original and fully your own. (similar to AI-index 2)

Besides this statement about use of generative AI, also consider that the energy consumption required for training generative models contributes significantly to carbon emissions. This also holds for interacting with and applying these models. It also might negatively affect you as a student; recent literature suggests it hampers your creativity (Habib et al. 2024), it fosters procrastination and memory loss (Abbas et al., 2024) and might affect other cognitive skills as well (Heersmink, 2024).

References on AI effects:

Abbas, M., Jam, F.A. & Khan, T.I. Is it harmful or helpful? Examining the causes and consequences of generative AI usage among university students. Int J Educ Technol High Educ 21, 10 (2024).

Habib, S., Vogel, T., Anli, X., & Thorne, E. (2024). How does generative artificial intelligence impact student creativity?. Journal of Creativity, 34(1), 100072.

Heersmink, R. Use of large language models might affect our cognitive skills. Nat Hum Behav (2024).

APPENDIX A: Assignment instructions in general

Objective: For this course you will design a nudge for one of the available fictitious problems provided in the course. You will do this during the tutorials and in the weeks in between. The nudge should target a current problematic behavior. These current problematic behaviors have been collected in cooperation with the Green Office at our University and through the municipality of Utrecht and realistic, but fictitious questions. Each problematic behavior will be handled by one group of students per tutorial group. Each problematic behavior will be assigned to a group based on best available preference, i.e. based on student's preference rankings. It is important that your nudge has a clear theoretical background and could be easily implemented in real life as if they would be presented to their respective questioner (typically a manager or policymaker).

At the end of the course you will present your nudge by means of a) a paper, in which you explain the theoretical background of your idea; and b) an poster presentation in which you pitch your idea.

Approach: Throughout the tutorial sessions you will work on the theoretical background and design of your nudge.

Grading: written part 60%, presentation part 40%; grading of these parts of the assignment will be done on both content (75%) and style (25%) of the essay describing your nudge: does it cover the scientific background properly (e.g. which heuristics), does it discuss ethical implications and practical issues that might result from your nudge? Is it all written down/explained concisely and without scientific jargon? Can a policymaker use this document to understand and implement your nudge?

Your essay will be turned in after the final presentation session, and before the exam on January 22nd at 17:00 at the latest.

NOTE: Although there is no (individual) feedback from your tutorial teacher on a draft version of your essay, you should have ample time during the tutorials to ask questions that pertain to (parts of) your essay and especially during the last optional dot-the-I's tutorial. Moreover, keep in mind that the course is at Master's level and at that level we expect you to be able to assess for yourself whether you have sufficiently covered the criteria as mentioned further below in this manual.

APPENDIX B: tutorials and preparation week by week

Tutorials: Week-by-week

Below you will find a more detailed program of what will be done in the consecutive meetings of this course. Per meeting is indicated what has to be done in the unsupervised hour and in what you will be doing in the supervised hours of that particular tutorial.

Meeting 1 (lecture: intro)

Preparation/unsupervised hour: In the unsupervised hour before the tutorial already do some research on your assigned case. What seems to be the problem here? How would you formulate that in a proper research question?

During the meeting: During the supervised tutorial you'll discuss with another group (or two when there are uneven numbers of groups) each other case. Do your fellow students perhaps have insights that you did not think of yet? You'll also plenary discuss the cases with your tutorial teacher. Lastly, you'll spend some time on writing the first part of your essay while your teacher is available for questions.

Meeting 2 (lecture: dual systems)

Unsupervised hour: based on the introduction lecture and the lecture on dual systems, use the unsupervised hour of this second meeting to think of how your specific assigned problematic behavior would be nudgeable.

During the meeting: during the meeting we will dive into the behaviors for which a nudge will be designed. Using a peer discussion you will determine how and what parts of the behaviors are nudgeable based on the knowledge on impulsive versus reflective processes as was shown in the lecture. After this peer discussion, and a plenary discussion with your teacher, each group will start writing the part of their essay on the nudge they are going to design that describes the behavior and its processes that will be influenced.

Meeting 3 (lecture: heuristics)

Unsupervised hour: based on the lecture on heuristics, write down a short inventory of heuristics that could play a role in the behavior you are going to nudge.

During the meeting: during the meeting you will make an inventory of heuristics that can be used in designing your nudge. Using a peer discussion and using knowledge from the lecture as well as further literature research you will determine which heuristics are more or less usable in the meeting. After this group discussion, and a plenary discussion with the teacher, each group will start writing the part of their essay on the nudge are going to design that describe the heuristics involved in the nudge and how this will influence the behavior to be nudged.

Meeting 4 (lecture: attention and perception)

Preparation/unsupervised hour: Using the knowledge of attentional and perceptional factors as discussed in the lecture, brainstorm on the appearance of your nudge.

During the meeting: In the meeting, sketch the appearance of your nudge out on a piece of paper. Next, in the tutorial we will spend some time on how you can to do so digitally. After that, each group will try to do so themselves and try to go from sketch to first full design of your nudge. The teacher will be available for questions again.

Meeting 5 (lecture: recap)

Preparation before lecture: prepare any remaining questions you might have, which you have send by Wednesday the 20th of December at the latest to the coordinator, and want to ask about either lectures, poster or essay.

Preparation: think of a couple of questions that could be part of the examination, write them down and send them to the course coordinator via email no later than December 20th 5 PM

During the meeting: We will use to that we will focus on preparing for the exam by answering and discussing the prepared questions of your fellow students.

Meeting 6 (guest interviews)

Preparation/unsupervised hour: Prepare a first draft of your essay, which includes a) background information on the behavior you are going to design a nudge for; b) what mechanisms could be targeted by the nudge; c) an (initial) idea for a specific nudge. This preparation has partly already been done in the previous meetings. Have it ready before the tutorial.

During the meeting: in the meeting we will take to time to read another group's draft on the different parts mentioned above (background, mechanism, specific nudge) and discuss it with each other. The remainder of the meeting will be used to incorporate this feedback and further write on the essay.

Meeting 7 (optional attendance, dot the I's session)

During the meeting: in a plenary session you will be discussing the questions that you have, in general terms whenever possible (to save time), with your tutorial teacher: questions that overlap in content can be discussed as one question. This is an optional tutorial to dot the I's if you need it.

Presentation session

In the final presentation session all students will present their nudge in a poster session. Each poster on a nudge will contain background information, a sketch of the design of the nudge, possible issues and their solutions. Students and teachers will judge these posters, resulting a teacher's and student's prize for best nudge. This poster session will be done online. Instructions will follow early January on Brightspace.

A full schedule of the course can be found at the end of the manual. Criteria for the essay can be found on the next pages.

Criteria Essay Nudging

In your essay you'll present the theoretical background of the nudge you design (max 6 A4, excluding references) in which a couple of aspects[1] should be clearly present:

- Background information on the behaviour you want nudge: clearly describe what the problematic behavior is that you are going to nudge. In other words, state which behavior you are going to change and why.
- Theoretical insight: what factors are related to the performance of the behavior? How are dual systems involved?
- Heuristics: related to the determinants of the behavior as described above, what heuristics could you use and how do they work in changing behavior?
- Description of the nudge: provide a specific description of what the nudge would look like. The specific nudge should clearly follow from the sections above.
- Conclusion: work towards a conclusion that combines the theory with the nudge as you describe it.

Grading will be done in accordance with the above (a bit superfluous perhaps, but it never hurts to reiterate) content wise, which makes up 75% of the grade. The remainder of the grade is based on presentation and style:

- Content (75%)
    - Background information on the behavior
    - Theoretical insight
    - Heuristics
    - Description of the nudge
    - Conclusion
- Presentation/style (25%)
    - Writing style: is the writing style scientific and comprehensible? (be precise in grammar and spelling!)
    - Structure: does the essay have a coherent structure with a clear beginning and end?

Furthermore:

- Create a title page that contains the following information: title, number of words, title of the course, your names, your student numbers and the name of the teacher.
- Write the essay using font size 12, line spacing 1.5. Be sure to use a clear writing style with preferably not too long sentences. Don't use colloquial or informal language, but also prevent writing in a needlessly complicated manner. The more clear and concise you can be, the better. Use spell check and double check spelling yourself as well.
- Use APA guidelines when referencing

[1] If one of the aspects does not need much text to be described, consider extending the essay (within the page limit) and going more in-depth on a) whether the problematic could be nudged in the first case, or b) whether implementation has ethical implications. In other words, if your text space allows it, go as in-depth and be as critical as possible.

Criteria for the ½ to 1 Page Reflection on the Guest Interviews

Your reflection on the guest interviews should include the following:

- A description of the main points you've learned from the guest interviews, along with your viewpoint on Nudging as a behaviour intervention technique.
- Be specific about what you take from each interview separately.

Below you will find a full overview of the course. Lectures are always from 11:00---11:45 followed by an unsupervised period. Tutorials start at 13:15. The presentation session on 22/01/25. Examination on 24/01/24 is from 8:30 to 10:30. Guest interviews will be between 11:00 and 12:45 on January 10th and 17th.

week	date	lecture topic	literature self-study	lecturer	Tutorials
47	14/11/25	Introduction	Thaler & Sunstein chapters: complete Part I	Benjamins	13:15-15:00
48	28/11/25 **at 10:00!**	Dual Systems	Article(s) Kahneman, D. (2003). A perspective on judgment and choice. American Psychologist,58, 697-720 Melnikoff, D.E., & Bargh, J.A. (2018). The Mythical Number Two. Trends in Cogntive Sciences, 22(4), 280-293 D.T.D. de Ridder, F.M.Kroese and L.C. van gestel (2022). Nudgeability: Mapping Conditions of Susceptibility to Nudge Influence, Perspectives on Psychological Science, 17(2) 346–359	De Ridder	13:15-15:00
49	5/12/25	Heuristics	Article(s) Gigerenzer, G., & Gaissmaier, W. (2011). Heuristic decision making. Annual review of psychology, 62, 451-482 Thaler & Sunstein chapters: complete Part II	Benjamins	13:15-15:00
50	12/12/25	Attention & perception	Simons & Chabris (1999). Gorillas in our midst: sustained inattentional blindness for dynamic events. Perception. 28, 1059-1074 Wang, L., Yu, H., & Zhou, X. (2013). Interaction between value and perceptual salience in value-driven attentional capture. Journal of Vision. 13, 1–13 Thaler & Sunstein chapters: complete Part III & IV	Benjamins	13:15-15:00
51	19/12/25	Recap lecture	Thaler & Sunstein complete part IV & V	Benjamins	13:15-15:00
		Holidays			
2	9/1/26	Guest interviews	Guest interview	Benjamins/Verlaan	13:15-15:00
3	15/1/26	Guest interviews	Guest interview + optional plenary tutorial	Benjamins/Dirkmaat	13:15-15:00
4	21/1/26	Poster session			
	23/1/26	Examination	Resit date is TBD Exam inspection date is TBD		