Lessons from "Nudge" by Richard Thaler and Prof. Cass R. Sunstein
Yale University Press, 2008

Basic Premise:

- **People are really bad at doing what they know they should do.** They are bad at making the right choices, even in really simple circumstances. They are worse at making the right choices in complicated, high-stakes matters.
- The general public would be very well served if **those in charge of delivering the choices helped us make the right ones** for ourselves (as opposed to the right choices for them… the expensive cereal being put at eye level, the default deductible on car insurance being the most lucrative for the salesman, etc.)
- Fun fact, the arrangement and order in which school lunch items are served can influence students to take 25% more of any particular healthy food item.
- People in charge of designing the decision-making environment are called "**decision architects**."
- The goal should be **not to mandate an action** but to set up a situation in which more of the students **independently make the best choice** for them.
- This is termed "**paternal libertarianism**": keeping free will, but giving **kindly, unknown nudges** in the right direction. It sounds like subliminal messaging, but it's less subversive and 1984-ish.

The book was mostly about economics – How many of you have calculated how much money you need at retirement in order to keep a certain level of lifestyle for the remaining 30+ years? How many of you have calculated the amount that you need to save/invest monthly in order to reach that goal by the time you retire? How many of you actually do it? We know we should, but we don't.

But since we are in charge of so many bad decision-makers (students), and we are expected to help them overcome the inadequacies in their frontal lobes, every point made in the book made me think of how useful this info is for teachers. Many of the tips and observations listed here aren't really new (they're very Harry Wong-esque), but they are good to think about in terms of our decision architecture as we design courses and procedures.

Automatic vs. Reflective Thought: Our brains will automatically respond to things before we can stop it from screwing things up. When students are making high-impact decisions with gut reactions, bad things happen. We need to train them to double-check their impulses in order to make the right decisions. <u>Incorporate double-checking and reflection into instructions and procedures.</u>

Inertia: *syn: laziness* People keep doing what they have been doing, even if they know it's not the best thing to do. The automatic thinking system is easy. The reflective is hard and takes effort. It's human nature to use it as little as possible. So <u>make sure that the students start out doing the right thing</u> so that they don't have to change things. To do this, take great care <u>in planning your Default Settings</u>.

Default Settings: Setting an accepted standard in the classroom will take advantage of students' inertia and make their automatic system default to good behavior without even thinking about it. Example: Put a quote or riddle on the board at the beginning of class or in the announcements on your course website. The students read this, then keep reading the rest of the board to know what they're doing that day. Once people are doing an activity, they are less likely to skip something attached to it, even if the next task is something that they would not have done if it was on its own.

If you want students to take part in something beneficial but extra, offer it as an **opt-out option** as opposed to an opt-in. "Email me to let me know if you did not watch the extra video I posted. There's no penalty, I just want to take some data on it." (even if the data-taking is a lie) Aversion to email you will entice more students to watch the video. Yes, some students would opt out and still not tell you, but many will comply, just to avoid the lie of omission if they don't watch and then don't email you. Congratulations. You've just nudged students into making a good choice.

Bundling Decisions: Goes along with the default and opt-in/opt-out situations. By bundling something the students want with something that most of them don't want, more are likely to do the unpleasant task.

Eliminating Obstacles: We should try to identify what exactly is preventing students from doing what they are supposed to in a given situation. Mr. Vitt's students weren't keeping organized notebooks because their papers weren't hole-punched. So now they are… excuse eliminated. Students aren't very good at even realizing what the obstacles are, so a conversation with them can help you find them together and make a plan of how to eliminate them.

Sometimes, in an effort to give students more freedom, we make decisions harder by giving them more choices. Too many possibilities leaves students feeling that they don't know where to start, so when making plans for projects or tasks for differentiated instruction, have a process built in to help students easily choose the best option for them.

Valuing Loss vs. Gifts: People value what they have more than what they don't. You wouldn't pay $2 for a candy bar from the store, but if you had a candy bar with your lunch, you wouldn't sell it for less than $2 to someone who asked. It's your lunch. It's worth $2 to you now. The book cited studies showing that we would sell an item we possessed for twice as much as we would pay for it, even if it's something that we don't really care about.

Using collateral from students can help motivate them. From the beginning of your course you can include some type of privilege or treat, which is then threatened if the students aren't performing up to your standards in some way. This negative reinforcement is probably less necessary for higher education and would probably lead to resentment and/or rioting if not used wisely with more adult students, but taking advantage of perceptions of Loss vs. Gift can still be done. According to the book, **it is better to warn of harms than to advertise future benefits.**,

A lost opportunity can work the same way as losing a real object. Saying "Come in any time after school if you need help" might not be as effective as posting a schedule of certain days and times, even if they are fewer, because then if students miss one session they feel like they have a finite number of opportunities remaining and would make it a priority to catch the next one. You probably already do this with your office hours, but you could do this with class resources as well. "I'm only posting the link to this website for 2 days. After that the Google deities will have to help you locate it." The student response: "On man, I'd better make that a priority." This is the reason that videos on your Netflix queue have expiration dates. I have to watch them before the time's up.

Nudging Feedback: Home owners were sent data with their utility bills to show their usage and whether they were above or below the neighborhood average for that month. The people who used more than average made efforts to reduce their usage the next month. Yay!   The ones who used less

than average used *more* the next month because they felt like they had been too miserly and had some room to splurge. Boo!

Students seem to look at the wiggle room between passing and failing this way. They will frequently work toward the average, rather than toward what is best. Another test gave the same information but put a big smiley sticker on the below-average users. They were so tickled by the approval that the next month they used even less. The simple statement of "Hey, you're spending less money than your neighbors," isn't as effective as "Hey, you're spending less money than your neighbors ☺".

Seeing Immediate Results: Our automatic systems want to see immediate results. If we give this to students then their decision will be more easily nudged. Have students graph test results. They can see a tangible display of success or failure, and this is an involved process that will trigger their reflective system to analyze their performance. "Wow, maybe I should study more." The book talked about another energy study in which electricity usage was monitored, and the more being used turned a glowing ball in the house from green to yellow to red. This worked better than any written message from the utility companies. Students try to replicate this through the face color or forehead vein size of an increasingly frustrated teacher. We could save them this trouble by incorporating immediate visual signals in our classrooms. Having checklists for missing assignments and subsequently completed assignments would work similarly.

Immediate result example: Custodians were tired of cleaning up the urine from the floor/outsides of urinals, so someone designed a urinal with a little picture of a fly etched into it. Problem solved. "Hey, I totally nailed that fly. I'm an above-average, awesome guy! Women will flock to me!" Simple, attainable targets help get the job done.

http://nudges.org
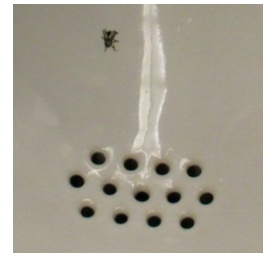
Social Influence: A free music download site for virtually unknown bands monitored how people downloaded songs when there were download numbers posted for each song vs. when there were none. With the number of downloads shown, certain songs received way more downloads because, in most cases, a few people downloaded those first, and everyone afterward saw that they were highly popular, and therefore, better than the rest. In a classroom, the first or most vocal student has a major influence on the attitudes and class-approval of the others. The mood caused by these students greatly affects the decisions of the others, most noticeable, for the bad and disruptive.

Another test had individuals who were given an easy task, like "Is the string in your hand longer or shorter than the one on this computer screen?" They got it right. Then individuals performed the task in a room with other people and spoke their answers out loud. If the researchers planted a few people in the room who intentionally got the question wrong, this caused an alarming number of unknowing subjects to change their obviously right answer to match the vocal majority. Students would rather be wrong and social than right and stick out.

So when students are using discussion boards and wikis, or in other interactions, it's very important to monitor tones and feelings of the discussions from the start in order to promote the right kind of social influence and avoid any pressure to bow to the majority opinion. These tools help students learn from each other, but we need to make sure they're teaching each other correctly.

Overall: We need to intentionally design our classroom activities with intricate **decision-architecture** to take into account the tendencies of students, to reduce their hurdles, to change the default procedures or frames of mind, and to increase positive motivation and decrease negative social demotivation.

Duh, we already know this. But…
- What are our default settings when we plan courses? Are they are good as they need to be?
- How inert are we in our ruts? Are they good ruts or bad?
- What silly obstacles keep us from doing all of the stuff that we know we need to? What steps need to be taken to overcome those?
- Do we make more of our decisions for the good of our classroom economy (the best us of time, stress, time, effort, time…. and time) with our inert automatic systems or our thoughtful reflective systems?

For more information, these are some Nudge resources:
- Nudge Blog: http://nudges.org/
- Nudge page at Yale University Press: http://yalepress.yale.edu/book.asp?isbn=9780300122237

And seriously, look into how much you need for retirement:
http://cgi.money.cnn.com/tools/retirementplanner/retirementplanner.jsp
http://hffo.cuna.org/12433/article/491/html

(See, I gave you a couple of places to start, eliminating the "I don't know where to start" hurdle.) Nudge.