“Design Thinking” Syllabus
Fall 2026

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Course Director
Dr. Giada Baldessarelli
giada.baldessarelli@hhs.se

Course Assistant
Priscilla Bunday
priscilla.bunday@sses.se

To receive a quicker response, kindly send your emails to the course director and assistant. This will ensure that everyone receives the information and can respond promptly.

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COURSE OVERVIEW

Course Outline and Approach

This course introduces students to Design Thinking (or DT), a human-centered approach to innovation that supports entrepreneurial problem-solving and venture creation. Entrepreneurs often face uncertain and rapidly changing environments where data and precedent offer limited guidance. Design Thinking provides a structured yet flexible process to explore such uncertainty creatively and systematically.

Through empathy, experimentation, and iteration, students will learn to identify unmet needs, generate and test novel ideas, and translate insights into viable business opportunities. The approach encourages seeing the world not only as it is but as it could be, enabling entrepreneurs to design solutions that resonate with users while addressing fundamental market gaps.

By integrating Design Thinking into entrepreneurial practice, students will develop the mindset and methods needed to navigate ambiguity, craft distinctive value propositions, and build ventures that combine innovation, feasibility, and human relevance.

Teaching and Learning Approach

In this course, you will work in teams to tackle real innovation challenges using a human-centered approach. You will learn by observing and engaging with people to discover what truly matters to them, building empathy to guide the development of new ideas. These ideas will then be turned into prototypes and tested to enhance their value and feasibility. The focus of this course is hands-on, experiential learning. You will directly apply the Design Thinking methodology, evaluate its effectiveness in creating and testing innovative solutions, and experiment with tools to develop insights, ideas, prototypes, and tests rooted in human needs.

Learning occurs through experiential activities, group discussions, and collaborative project work, reflecting the iterative and team-oriented nature of entrepreneurial problem definition and problem-solving.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

This course aims to teach PhD, MFA, MSc, and MA students the advanced methods for Design Thinking. The learning outcomes for the course are for the participants to be able to independently:

- Acquire and execute Design Thinking methods
- Evaluate and organize the concepts that such a methodology generates
- Discuss and critically assess the strengths, weaknesses, and innovative potential of proposals from course colleagues
- Develop, document, and articulate a coherent design proposal based on the results generated
- Demonstrate how Design Thinking can change and enlarge the student's own disciplinary' world view'
- Develop and argue for an interdisciplinary entrepreneurial initiative inspired by the Design Thinking process.

SCHEDULE

The course will take place only **face-to-face** at the Stockholm School of Economics. Class runs from 17:15 to 20:00 on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and we meet in room A350 (see "Logistics" below for info).

The schedule may be subject to minor changes before and during the course to accommodate the availability of the guest speakers or in case of emergencies. The students are responsible for tracking announcements and changes on SSES Canvas. Any syllabus changes will be announced ahead of time on SSES Canvas.

Nr	Date	Time	Content
1	2025-11-03	17:15-20:00	Introduction to the Course and Teams
2	2025-11-05	17:15-20:00	Ecosystem Mapping & Needfinding
3	2025-11-10	17:15-20:00	Empathy Work
4	2025-11-12	17:15-20:00	Defining and (Re)Framing the Problem
5	2025-11-17	17:15-20:00	Generating and Selecting Ideas
6	2025-11-19	17:15-20:00	Guest Lecture and Coaching Session
7	2025-11-24	17:15-20:00	Prototyping and Testing
8	2025-11-26	17:15-20:00	Intermezzo – All Things Design Thinking
9	2025-12-01	17:15-20:00	Iteration and Refinement
10	2025-12-03	17:15-20:00	From Prototype to Impact
11	2025-12-15	17:15-20:00	The Grand Finale

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory. However, you can miss up to two sessions out of 11 without a grade penalty. Please note that you must attend Session 1 (intro) and 11 (the Grand Finale).

Students who miss more than two sessions will receive a 5/100-point penalty for each additional missed session (for example, if a student misses 4 sessions, their maximum possible grade will be 90 points instead of 100 points). **You must attend at least 6 sessions**. There are no make-up assignments for this course.

Students who miss session 1 or 11 will have 10 points deducted for each session, unless extenuating circumstances are provided (i.e., you inform me before the session and you provide a doctor's note). There are no retakes for the group presentation or exhibition. There are no make-up assignments for this course.

COMPOSITION OF FINAL GRADE

The assessment for this course is based on multiple components: 1) individual assignments (marked with IND) and 2) group assignments (marked with GR).

All assignment deadlines are at midnight. For example, a deadline of November 10 means you must submit by 23:59 CET on November 10. All assignments must be submitted through SSES Canvas.

You must receive at least a passing grade on each assignment (alongside attending at least 6 out of 11 sessions). If the quality of the submitted work does not meet the passing level, you (individual or team) will need to perform additional work to improve the material submitted in order to achieve approval (Failx). Additional work to improve a Failx score can only earn the lowest points needed to pass the assignment (for example, 25 points out of 50 for the PPJ).

Code	Assignment	Points	Deadline
IND_01	Needfinding interviews (individual)	20 points	November 10, 16:59 CET
GR_01	Your POV (Point of View) (group)	Pass/fail	November 17, 16:59 CET
GR_02	Your Project Presentation (group)	Pass/fail	December 15, class
GR_03	Your Exhibition (group)	Pass/fail	December 15, class
GR_04	Your PPJ (Project Process Journal) (group)	50 points	December 20, 23:59 CET
IND_02	Peer review (individual)	Pass/fail	December 20, 23:59 CET
IND_03	DYF (Design Your Future) (individual)	30 points	January 5, 2026, 23:59 CET
	Maximum points	**100**	

Please note that your grades will be transferred in line with regulations at your home institution.

PREPARATION AND ASSIGNMENTS

The course uses scientific publications and popular articles, all available through SSES Canvas. We expect that you read the required articles before class. We also expect that you submit individual and group assignments on time.

Session 1: Introduction to the Course and Teams
Preparation: **Individual**
- Watch: YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M66ZU2PCIcM
- Read: Liedtka, J. (2018). Why design thinking works. Harvard Business Review, 96(5): 72-79

Session 2: Ecosystem Mapping
Preparation: **Group**
- Choose: a challenge (note that this is the challenge you will be working on until the end of the course; also note that 2 challenges are provided, and we will go on a first-come, first-served basis to split teams between the challenges).

Session 3: Empathy Work
Preparation: **Individual**
- IND_01: Conduct and document 3 interviews (each student is expected to do so) and submit them via SSES Canvas by November 10, 16:59 CET
- Read: Madsbjerg, C., & Rasmussen, M. B. (2014). An anthropologist walks into a bar. *Harvard Business Review*, 92(3): 80-90

Session 4: Defining and (Re)Framing the Problem
Preparation: **Individual**
- Read: Beckman, S. L., & Barry, M. (2007). Innovation as a learning process: Embedding design thinking. *California Management Review*, 50(1), 25-56.

Session 5: Generating and Selecting Ideas
Preparation: **Group**
- GR_01: Submit your POV (via SSES Canvas, instructions can be found on the platform) by November 17, 16:59 CET

Preparation: **Individual**
- Read: Gregersen, H. (2018). Better brainstorming: Focus on questions, not answers, for breakthrough insights. *Harvard Business Review*. 96(2), 64-71.

Session 6: Coaching Session
No preparation

Session 7: Prototyping and Testing
Preparation: **Individual**
Read: Kelley, T. (2001). Prototyping is the shorthand of design. *Design Management Journal*. 12(3), 35-42

Session 8: Intermezzo – All Things Design Thinking
Preparation: **Individual**

- Read: Elsbach, K. D., & Stigliani, I. (2018). Design thinking and organizational culture: A review and framework for future research. *Journal of Management*, 44(6), 2274-2306.
- Read: Boland Jr, R. J., Collopy, F., & Lyytinen, K. (2008). Managing as Designing: Lessons for Organization Leaders from the Design Practice of Frank O. Gehry. *Design Issues*, *24*(1).

Session 9: Iteration
No preparation

Session 10: From Prototype to Impact
No preparation

Session 11: The Grand Finale
Preparation: **Group**
- GR_02: Prepare a 7-minute presentation
- GR_03: Prepare one (or more if needed) physical artifact for the exhibition

THE END

GR_04 and IND_02 are due on December 20, 23:59 CET.
IND_03 is due on January 5, 2026, 23:59 CET.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA AND INSTRUCTIONS

Plagiarism and cheating are frauds and will be treated as such. For more information, we refer to SSES Guidelines and SSE Academic Policies.

Individual assignments

IND_01: Needfinding Interviews; individual, 20 points

Deadline: November 10, 16:59 CET, to submit via SSES Canvas.

Empathy work is critical to gain an in-depth understanding of users' pain points and subsequently their needs. Each of you is expected to conduct (at least) 3 interviews with users within the user group(s) you identified.
Interviews should be documented in two complementary ways:

1. You can either record them (representative quotes must be extracted) or take extensive notes (again, representative quotes must be extracted) **AND**
2. You must fill out the interview template (you can find it on SSES Canvas).

The interviews are evaluated based on the following criteria:

- Depth of information about users' behaviors, struggles, motivations, and feelings
- Observation conducted during fieldwork (can be documented through fieldnotes, pictures, and more)
- Completeness and insightfulness of the interview reporting template
- Overall clarity of documentation, including whether the template incorporates quotes, observations, and contextual cues, and whether it is easily interpretable by others.

IND_02: Peer Review; individual, pass/fail

Deadline: December 20, 23:59 CET, to submit via SSES Canvas.
Because this is an experiential course, you will work in teams to complete all group assignments. Each team member is expected to contribute actively to the preparation, editing, and creation of every deliverable, and to collaborate respectfully with the rest of the team.
To support fairness and accountability, you are required to complete a peer review survey assessing your teammates' contributions and collaboration. Peer review results will be considered when determining final grades. Cases of consistent under-contribution ("free-riding") may result in a grade cap or reduction.
Failure to submit your peer review will also negatively affect your final grade.

IND_03: DYF (Design Your Future); individual, 30 points

Deadline: January 5, 2026, 23:59 CET, to submit via SSES Canvas.
The Design Your Future (DYF) assignment invites you to apply the principles, tools, and mindset of design thinking to the most personal of design challenges, i.e., your own future. You may choose to focus on your career path or your life more broadly. You will use the design thinking process to explore how you might intentionally design your next steps. The purpose of this assignment is to demonstrate how design thinking can be used to navigate uncertainty, define intentions, and experiment with possibilities in a structured yet creative way.

Your submission should document your process and insights as a reflective but personal piece, showing how you have used the Design Thinking methodology and tools to design a more intentional version of your future. The emphasis is on application, reflection, and learning transfer, not on producing a final "life plan."

Your DYF is evaluated based on the following criteria:

- Clear and explicit application of the design thinking process to your chosen focus. The process should be traceable and demonstrate iteration and learning
- Strong demonstration of insight into your motivations, values, and assumptions. The reflection should be specific, concrete, and grounded in personal experience (you today, your past, your context) rather than abstract statements
- Evidence of generative thinking through the creation of multiple possible futures or prototypes. The work should display curiosity, imagination, and a willingness to test unconventional ideas
- Documentation of development and test of a mini-prototype (e.g., setting up mentorship, trying a new structure or routine, shadowing someone in a desired field)
- Creativity of the overall assignment format, feel free to integrate maps, photos, or sketches, or to experiment with alternative formats if appropriate
- Clear, engaging, and well-organized writing with smooth flow and minimal redundancy

General guidelines:

- No word limit is set for this assignment, however the text should be well organized and clear (this means that writing too little or too much are discouraged)
- You may include visuals (e.g., photos, journey maps, prototypes, diagrams) to support your narrative
- You may structure the submission as a written report, a visual journey, or a hybrid format, as long as your design process and learning outcomes are clearly communicated
- Please include a title page with your full name and email address.

Note: We understand that your reports include personal information and thoughts, and we will treat them with confidentiality. They will only be read and graded by this course's core faculty (course director). While you might feel hesitant to share personal details, we encourage you to use this opportunity for reflection and to prepare for future stages in life.

Team Project

The Team Project (or innovation/design challenge) is intended to create a live, practice-based learning situation. This project enables you to engage in a field-based project and gain hands-on knowledge about Design Thinking, giving you the chance to find opportunities and face and overcome the challenges that innovators experience. The project will also help you develop the ability to effectively apply Design Thinking principles to a real-world innovation challenge.

- **Team Composition**: Teams will be assigned before the course begins. We aim to create mixed-gender multidisciplinary teams that come from different backgrounds and institutions.
- **Choose a Challenge**: The innovation challenge will be available on SSES Canvas after Session 1. Teams are responsible for choosing between two challenges on a first-come, first-served basis.
- **Group Assignments**: The project includes four parts. Of these, two are parts of reporting on your project in written form, and two are to be delivered during the last class.

- **General Guidelines for Group Assignments**: All assignments related to the project should demonstrate a) your understanding of the key frameworks, perspectives, concepts, ideas, and tools introduced in the course, b) your ability to relate these frameworks, perspectives, concepts, ideas, and tools to one another, and c) your ability to creatively apply these frameworks, perspectives, concepts, ideas, and tools to the innovation challenge given to you.

GR_01: Your POV (Point of View); group, pass/fail

Deadline: November 17, 16:59 CET, to submit via SSES Canvas.
The Point of View (POV), also called the design brief or problem statement, should be a one-sentence statement that needs to be uploaded on SSES Canvas. You will receive more guidelines on this during class.

GR_02: Your Project Presentation; group, pass/fail

Deadline: December 13, during class (also to submit via SSES Canvas)
You will present your project at the Grand Finale (our final session). You can use a PowerPoint or another suitable tool (videos, role plays, etc.). Please be prepared to use your laptop and upload all digital materials to SSES Canvas.

General guidelines for the presentation:
- Maximum of **7 minutes** (you will be stopped at minute 7)
- Maintain simplicity and clarity. Tell a story.
  - What is the core message you want to communicate? How was your process?
  - What are the main insights you discovered? What is your POV? What is your solution?
  - What did users think about your solution?
- How much time you want to spend describing the process vs. the prototype is up to you.

The presentation is evaluated based on the following criteria:
- A clear and convincing "chain of evidence" linking observation, analysis, and solution
- Compelling focus on user needs
- Proper use of terminology and tools/concepts utilized
- Originality of the solution
- Overall quality of the presentation

GR_03: Your Exhibition; group, pass/fail

Deadline: December 13, during class
The Grand Finale session is intended as an exhibition that will give teams the chance to showcase their Design Thinking intervention to their classmates and course faculty. During the session, teams will be assigned an area where they can place images/posters/prototypes related to their project, so that the audience can learn more about the project (beyond what the team will present orally, through the slides). You will receive more guidelines on this during class.

GR_04: Your PPJ (Project Process Journal); group, 50 points

Deadline: December 20, 23:59 CET, to submit via SSES Canvas.
The Project Process Journal (PPJ) serves as the core of the course and will be used to assess students' proficiency regarding the intended learning objectives.

The PPJ involves writing your project process journal. It should highlight the steps you followed, your empirical observations, your decisions, and your final solution that can be implemented and addresses (or at least mitigates) user needs. The PPJ should describe in detail what you did and why, so it should read as personal (please avoid impersonal writing style, since it is a journal).

General guidelines:

- This assignment can be up to 4,000 words long (excluding figures, tables, and references); no need for you to include screenshots of class slides
- The group PPJ can be structured as you wish, as long as it is clear what you, as a team, did to tackle the innovation challenge
- Please include a title page (with all student author names and email addresses listed).

The PPJ is evaluated based on the following criteria:

- Clear and detailed documentation of the project phases (e.g., what you have done and why, why you selected a specific solution, what other solutions you considered, where you struggled - if meaningful)
- Clear and compelling identification of human needs and how they were addressed
- Clear analytical process and claims substantiated through empirical evidence
- Clear and convincing motivation for conceptual and practical choices, as well as for any assumptions
- Originality of the solution(s)
- Evidence of empirical work: add an appendix, including a table with details (e.g., demographics, habits) of your interviewees, pictures (if possible), and at least a couple of quotes per interviewee (the more, the better)
- Clarity of writing, continuity of flow, and absence of redundancy
- Proper use of terminology and tools learnt during class
- Proper and insightful use of the literature

GenAI Policy

In this course, individuals and teams are allowed to use generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT and image generation tools like Dall-E) to address the project challenge and complete the activities involved in this course. Learning to use AI is an emerging skill, and the course provides students with the opportunity to practice it. AI can support students and teams in creating insightful and meaningful content. However, each team must submit all conversations the team (and each team member for individual assignments) had with AI chatbots through SSES Canvas.

For each assignment submitted on Canvas (when applicable), the team or individual must also include a document detailing all interactions with AI chatbots during project work and other assignments.

Please note that the team's and/or the individual student's chats with AI, regardless of their content, do not influence the assessment and grading of the deliverables (only the actual deliverables do). The reason why we, the course staff, collect all AI chats is to understand and analyze the different kinds of support AI provides to students' imagination, creativity, and reasoning. So, once again, each team or individual needs to submit every interaction they have had with AI.

Besides submitting all the conversations with AI, each team or individual must explicitly acknowledge and specify the use of AI in their assignments. For example, when a specific content (e.g., idea, concept, or anything else) originated from an interaction with AI, the team or individual should

add a citation to the AI tool (the citation should include the prompts used and the date; feel free to add this information in an Appendix at the end of the deliverable, if preferred). Referencing of generative AI also applies to visuals, such as images or videos. Failure to adequately disclose the use of AI constitutes plagiarism and violates SSE Academic Regulations.

Be aware of the limits of ChatGPT, such as the following:

- If minimum-effort prompts are used, ChatGPT will provide low-quality results. Teams and individuals will have to refine their prompts in order to get good outcomes. Prompt design and formulation are critical tasks that significantly influence the ability of AI to assist teams in their design efforts. While AI can provide useful base material and inspiration for the formulation of problems and solutions, the quality, insightfulness, and meaningfulness of the team's design work ultimately depend on the team's (human) ability to reflect, make sense, integrate, connect, augment, and further develop the information provided by the machine.
- Do not blindly trust anything the AI tool says. Cross-check the numbers and facts it gives with other sources. **Teams and individuals will be responsible for any errors or omissions caused by AI**.
- Do not use AI tools if you believe it is not appropriate for the case or circumstance.
- Do not submit sensitive or confidential information to AI tools unless there are credible guarantees of confidentiality.

Please note that this AI policy does not constitute official guidelines from the Stockholm School of Entrepreneurship nor from the Stockholm School of Economics. It only applies to this edition of the Design Thinking course.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Special Needs

Have you been granted educational support because of a documented impairment? If so, please contact the course director as soon as possible so that adequate accommodations can be made.

Sustainability

SSE strives to integrate sustainability into all its major operations, organized around the four pillars of research, education, campus, and outreach.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Students, staff, and faculty are wonderful: They motivate, foster creativity, and contribute to making the class a positive environment. SSE strives to build a community of individuals with diverse backgrounds and life experiences, free of discrimination based on racial and ethnic origin, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or religion.

To achieve this, we (the teaching team) aim to embrace different perspectives to foster a safe space where all (students, staff, and faculty) feel comfortable and can bring their best selves. We also expect you to work together and communicate clearly, respectfully, and in a timely fashion with one another.

Logistics

Room A350 is situated in the SSE main building at Sveavägen 65.

