COMPSCI 687: Reinforcement Learning
Syllabus

Fall 2025

Instructor:	Bruno Castro da Silva	**Time:**	Tue & Thur from 4:00 to 5:15 pm
Email:	bsilva@cs.umass.edu	**Place:**	***In person students*** Goessmann Laboratory, Add Room 64
			Students in the online section Please visit our online platforms

1 About the course

This course provides a thorough introduction and overview of reinforcement learning (RL). Reinforcement learning is a branch of artificial intelligence focused on learning to make decisions—based on the interactions of an agent with its environment—in order to efficiently solve a problem. Reinforcement learning algorithms repeatedly answer the question "What should be done next?". They learn to solve tasks/problems via trial-and-error, even when there is no supervisor telling the algorithm what the correct decision would have been in a few sample situations or contexts.

RL algorithms have been successfully deployed in a wide range of real-life problems. Examples include:

- Robotics applications (*What activity should a robot perform next to more rapidly clean a kitchen?*);
- Achieving super-human performance in complex video games (*What action should the game character execute next?*);
- Performing package delivery by teams of drones (*When and where should a drone drop a package?*);
- Creating personalized recommendations (*Which advertisement, song, or movie should an intelligent system show or recommend to a particular user?*);
- Medical applications (*How much insulin should be injected next? What drug should be given next?*);
- Environmental applications (*Which countermeasure for an invasive species should be deployed next?*);
- Dialogue systems (*What sentence should be spoken next to keep a user engaged with the system?*);
- Helping better understand how our brains work (*Where and how in the brain are estimates of expected reward represented and updated, given an animal's experiences?*);
- Implementing brain-machine interfaces (*How should a neural decoder map brain signals to commands sent, e.g., to a robotic arm?*).

Applications such as these are bound to change how we interact with artificial agents, making reinforcement learning one of the most promising areas of machine learning.

Broad topics covered in this course will include: Markov decision processes, reinforcement learning algorithms (model-free, batch/online, value function-based, actor-critics, policy gradient methods, etc.), and representations for reinforcement learning. Special topics may include ensuring the safety of reinforcement learning algorithms, hierarchical reinforcement learning, model-based algorithms, theoretical reinforcement learning, multi-agent reinforcement learning, and connections to animal learning.

In this course, each voice in the classroom has something of value to contribute. Please take care to respect the different experiences, beliefs, and values expressed by students and staff involved in this course. My colleagues and I support UMass' commitment to diversity and welcome individuals regardless of age, background, citizenship, disability, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, education, ethnicity, family status, geographical origin, language, military experience, political views, race, religion, socioeconomic status, and work experience.

2 Website

This course's lecture notes and syllabus will be hosted here. Homework assignments and other material will be posted in Canvas. Lectures will be recorded; recordings (along with .pdf slides) will also be on Canvas.

3 Class

Classes will be held Tuesdays and Thursdays from 4:00 pm to 5:15 pm in Goessmann Laboratory Add Room 64. Students enrolled in the online section of the course should refer to our online platforms.

4 Book

Parts of the course will be roughly based on the *second* edition of Sutton and Barto's book, *Reinforcement Learning: An Introduction*. It can be found on Amazon here. It is also available for free online here. Although the book is a fantastic introduction to the topic (and I encourage purchasing a copy if you plan to study reinforcement learning), owning the book is not a requirement.

5 Required background

We assume that students have an appropriate mathematical background in probability, statistics, multivariate calculus, linear algebra, and programming. The following references can provide a useful review:

- Probability Theory, by Maleki and Do.
- Linear Algebra and Matrix Calculus, by Kolter and Do.
- An Introduction to Statistical Learning, by James, Witten, Hastie and Tibshirani.
- Optimization: Any calculus textbook.
- Machine Learning: a Probabilistic Perspective, by Kevin Patrick Murphy.

6 Attendance policy

Students taking this course in person should make every effort to attend and actively participate in each class meeting. However, you are free to choose not to attend "regular" class meetings (i.e., classes where no assignments or exams are given) *if the circumstances warrant.* We do understand that all students are capable of autonomously deciding how to best allocate their time. However, notice that you are responsible for the classes you miss. In the event that you miss class, it is your responsibility to obtain the missed notes from a classmate and for picking up any handouts distributed in class by the instructor. The instructor will not provide class notes or condense the entire contents of a missed class period in an email message or a five-minute summary. *Important: please see Section 7.2 of this document for more details on this course's late policy regarding late homework submissions and missed exams.*

7 Grading

Your grade will have three components:

1. **Homework Assignments (**40%**)**: There will be frequent written and programming homework assignments. All assignments will have an equal weight.
2. **Midterm exam (**40%**)**.
3. **Project** (20%): As reinforcement learning transitions from an academic curiosity to practical tools that you may use in your professional lives, it is critical that we study how to implement, fine-tune, and deploy these algorithms in practice. Further details will be available when the project is assigned, after the most relevant course material has been covered.

A cumulative grade in $[90\% - 100\%]$ will be an A- or A, $[75\%, 90\%)$ will be a B-, B, or B+, $[65\%, 75\%)$ will be a C-, C, or C+, and $[55\% - 65\%)$ will be a D or D+. Course grades will be curved only in students' favor (that is, these thresholds may be lowered, but a grade of 90% will not be lower than an A-). **Some extra credit opportunities may be given. Your grade may be reduced by any amount at the instructor's discretion due to inappropriate behavior, such as academic dishonesty.**

7.1 Regrading policy

Errors in grading assignments and exams can occur despite the best efforts of the course staff. If you believe you have found a grading error, complete an online regrade request form via Gradescope. Regrade requests must be submitted no later than one week after the assignment is returned. Note that regrading may result in your original grade being *increased* or *decreased* as appropriate.

7.2 Late Policy

- Deadlines in this course are **strict**. A submission one minute after the deadline will receive zero credit. You are strongly encouraged to submit hours before any deadline.
- That said, to allow some flexibility to complete assignments (*homeworks*) given other constraints, you have a total of *five* free late days that you can choose to use when submitting a homework. You will be charged one late day for handing in an assignment within 24 hours after it is due, two late days for handing in an assignment within 48 hours after it is due, etc. Your assignment is considered late if either the written or code portions are submitted late. The late homework clock stops when both the written and code portions are submitted. After you have used up your late days, late homework will not count for credit except in exceptional circumstances (e.g., illness documented by a doctor's note).
- All exams must be taken at the scheduled time unless *(1)* there is a documented conflict and arrangements have been made with the instructor before the exam; or *(2)* you have a medical emergency and you bring proof of such to the instructor before final grades for the given exam are computed. In any other case (unless those covered by the University's Academic Regulations), missing an exam will result in a grade of "F" for that exam.

8 Office Hours

The teaching assistants (TAs) this semester will be **Lingdong Wang** (lingdongwang@umass.edu), **Shruti Chanumolu** (schanumolu@umass.edu), **Erfan Entezami** (eentezami@umass.edu), and **Sidong Zhang** (sidongzhang@umass.edu).

Office hours will be held according to the following schedule (starting on 09/11), except *(1)* on holidays; *(2)* if the UMass official schedule follows a different day of the week; or *(3)* when noted otherwise.

	Monday	**Tuesday**	**Wednesday**	**Thursday**	**Friday**
9:00am – 11:30am					Shruti
9:00am – 12:00pm	Erfan	Sidong	Erfan	Sidong	
1:00pm – 4:00pm	Lidong		Lidong		
2:00pm – 3:30pm					Shruti
2:00pm – 4:00pm				Shruti	
5:15pm – 6:30pm		Bruno		Bruno	

If one of the TAs or the instructor needs to reschedule office hours, an official announcement will be made on Canvas.

▷ For students enrolled in the in-person section of the course, **all office hours will take place in person unless noted otherwise**.

- If an in-person student cannot attend in person for a specific reason (for example, illness or travel), they should arrange with the TA *in advance* to schedule a time to receive help via Zoom. The TA will then provide a Zoom link for that session.

▷ For students enrolled in the remote section of the course, **all office hours will take place on Zoom at the times listed in the table above**.

- Students in the remote section of the course can join office hours via this Zoom link.

Locations:

- TA's in-person office hours:
  - LGRT T222 on Tuesdays.
  - LGRT T220 on all other days of the week.
- Prof. da Silva's office hours will be held immediately after each lecture. He will remain in the classroom for 1 hour and 15 minutes, post-lecture, helping students as needed.

9 SAT/Fail

At some time near the end of the semester (likely around the last day of class), you will be given the option to take the class SAT/Fail rather than for a letter grade. If you plan to take the course SAT/Fail, keep an eye out for an email (or a message on Canvas) from me around the end of the semester with instructions for requesting SAT/Fail. If you elect SAT/Fail, you will earn a SAT grade if your letter grade would have been a C or higher, and you will receive an F if your letter grade would have been lower. The above conditions *do not* hold for students with an academic honesty violation. In these cases, the requests described in this section are disallowed and/or unapproved.

10 Cheating

- Cheating will not be tolerated. Assignments may include instructions about what forms of collaboration are allowed, if/when relevant.
- Copying answers or code from external sources (books, web pages, etc.), from other students, or from solutions to assignments from previous years is *always* considered cheating. Note that, according to the new University statement on Responsible Use of Generative AI, the use of AI text generators (such as **ChatGPT**) is by default **prohibited**. To emphasize: no detectable copying is acceptable, even, e.g., copying a single sentence from an outside source. Sharing your code or solutions with other students is also considered cheating.
- The College of Information and Computer Sciences explicitly forbids any redistribution (including publicly available posting on an internet site) of any CICS course materials (including student solutions to course assignments, projects, exams, etc.) without the express written consent of the instructor of the course from which the materials come. Violations of this policy will be deemed instances of "facilitating dishonesty" (since a student making use of such materials would be guilty of plagiarism) and therefore may result in charges under the Academic Honesty Policy.
- Since students are expected to be familiar with this policy and the commonly accepted standards of academic integrity, ignorance of such standards is not normally sufficient evidence of lack of intent.
- **All instances of cheating will be reported to the university's Academic Honesty Board**, and will result in an F for the course.

11 Disability Services

The University of Massachusetts is committed to providing an equal educational opportunity for all students. If you have a documented physical, psychological, or learning disability on file with Disability Services, you may be eligible for academic accommodations to help you succeed in this course. If you would like to register with Disability Services, please visit their website or their office (161 Whitmore Administration Building; phone (413) 545–0892). Finally, if you have a documented disability that requires an accommodation, please notify me within the first two weeks of the semester so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

12 Title IX

In accordance with Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibits gender-based discrimination in educational settings that receive federal funds, the University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to providing a safe learning environment for all students, free from all forms of discrimination, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and retaliation.

- This includes interactions in person or online through digital platforms and social media. Title IX also protects against discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion, or related conditions, including recovery.
- There are resources here on campus to support you. For a summary of confidential and non-confidential options, see the UMass Title IX resources page.
- You do not need to make a formal report to access them. If you need immediate support, you are not alone. Free and confidential support is available 24 hours a day / 7 days a week / 365 days a year at the SASA Hotline 413-545-0800.