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A Trust-based Social Recommender for Teachers*

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Abstract. Online communities and networked learning provide teachers with social learning opportunities to interact and collaborate with others in order to develop their personal and professional skills. In this paper, Learning Networks are presented as an open infrastructure to provide teachers with such learning opportunities. However, with the large amount of learning resources produced everyday, teachers need to find out what are the most suitable resources for them. In this paper, recommender systems are introduced as a potential solution to address this issue. Unfortunately, most of the educational recommender systems cannot make accurate recommendations due to the sparsity of the educational datasets. To overcome this problem, we propose a research approach that describes how one may take advantage of the social data which are obtained from monitoring the activities of teachers while they are using our social recommender.

Keywords. Learning Network, recommender system, teacher, social data, social networks, sparsity, trust

1 Introduction

The Internet provides teachers with a social space to interact and access resources in the form of either knowledge content or knowledgeable people outside their school [15], [8]. Online learning communities and networked learning are increasingly accepted by teachers as opportunities to continuously develop their personal and professional skills [6], [2]. Learning Networks (LN) are online social networks that follow the main goal of professional online communities for lifelong learners such as teachers, who need continuous support and guidance to develop themselves both personally and professionally [16]. Learning Networks can provide teachers with an open infrastructure not only to share, annotate, rate and tag content, but also to exchange knowledge and experience with the other members of the LN. Learning from others in a social context is a promising form of learning, which motivates learners to continuously learn and exchange knowledge. Research has shown the positive effects of social learning [18], [3], [1]. In this paper, we discuss how one may take advantage of LNs as an infrastructure to support teachers as lifelong learners.

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With the increasing amount of user-generated content produced everyday in the form of learning resources, videos, discussion forums, blogs, etc., it becomes ever more difficult for teachers to find the most suitable content for their needs. Moreover, to support social learning, teachers need to be supported to find the most suitable people who can help them to learn more effectively by sharing knowledge and experiences [18]. Generally speaking, recommender systems have emerged as a practical approach to provide a user with the most suitable objects based on their past behaviour. Recommender systems have become popular because of their successful applications in the e-commerce world such as in Amazon[1] and eBay[2]. Fortunately, they can be adjusted to be used also in the educational domain [5], [14].

In general, recommender systems suggest items to a target user. They do so based on the similarity between an item's content description and the user's preferences model (content-based); or they measure similarity between user profiles to predict an item's rating for a target user based on the rating history of the users who are similar to the target user (collaborative filtering). In this research, we take advantage of collaborative filtering methods as we mainly focus on the interactions and collaborations between teachers within a social environment. However, it is too difficult to compute similarity of user profiles when there is no common set of ratings between the users or when there are too little rating data available; this is known as the *sparsity problem*. Educational datasets suffer from this problem more often than commercial datasets [19]. Therefore, we need to find ways to overcome the sparsity problem in educational datasets if it is our aim to enhance the performance of recommender systems in learning. Social trust has been introduced to many recommender systems as a response to the sparsity problem [9], [20], [11], [12], [13]. Ziegler and Golbeck [20] show a strong connection between trust and similarity between users. In general, users prefer to receive recommendations from the people they trust. Golbeck [9] shows that trust captures not only simple overall similarity between users but also other features of the profile similarity

In teachers' communities, teachers can perhaps be supported to find trustworthy resources as proxies for reliable sources of information. Such trustworthy resources enable teachers to feel more comfortable to share and interact within a closed and trustful community. To achieve this, we follow a trust-based recommender system proposed by [7] to create trust relationships between users based on the rating information of user profile and item profile. Fazeli et al. [7] proposed a concept called T-index to measure trustworthiness of users in order to improve the process of finding the nearest neighbours. The T-index is inspired on the H-index, which is used to evaluate the publications of an author. The higher the T-index value of a user, the more trustworthy the user becomes. Fazeli et al. showed how the T-index improves structure of a generated trust network of users by creating connections to more trustworthy users [7]. They computed the trust values between users based on the ratings users gave to the items in their system. Although ratings' information is one of the examples of users' activities within a social environment, other social activities of users

[1] http://www.amazon.com
[2] http://www.ebay.com

also can be worthwhile and should not be ignored up front. In general, the social activities of users describe each action of users within a social environment, for instance browsing a Web page, bookmarking, tagging, making a comment, giving rating, etc. We refer to the data that comes from the social activities of users, as "social data". In this research, we aim to enhance the existing trust-based recommender of Fazeli et al. [7] by social data which are obtained from monitoring the activities of teachers while they are using our social recommender.

Therefore, the first research question is:

RQ1: How can the sparsity problem within educational datasets be solved by using inter-user trust relationships which originally come from the social data of users?

Moreover, we aim to investigate the evolution of LNs while we collect social data from users. Therefore, we need to study the structure of LNs for teachers to show how using social data can help to cluster teachers more precisely and as a result to find the most suitable content or people for their needs. So, the second research question is:

RQ2: How can teachers' networks be made to evolve by the use of social data?

In the following section, we present the research methodology used to address these two questions.

2 Proposed research

Our main objective is to support teachers to find the most suitable content or people and do so more effectively. The idea is that through finding suitable peers and content they will be better able to develop their personal and professional skills.

In order to achieve this goal, we follow the methodology described by [14] for recommender systems in TEL. We extend the methodology by first conducting an interview study with teachers. The research work, therefore, consists of four steps: 1. Requirement analysis (literature review and interview study), 2. Dataset-driven study , 3. User evaluation study, 4. Pilot study. We will describe each step in terms of its main goal, used methods, and the expected outcomes, in the following subsections.

2.1 Requirement analysis (literature review and interview study)

- **Goal.** Besides a literature study on the issues and challenges teacher often face, we organized interview group sessions with teachers and collected information from them in order to investigate their main needs and requirements.
- **Method.** The interview group session was conducted using the nominal group technique (NGT) [4]; the session took almost 2 hours and 45 minutes. The participants were 18 teachers (novices, experts, mentors and supervising teachers) from different schools in the Limburg area, the Netherlands, invited by Fontys Hogeschool.

- **Description.** During the session, the participants were asked to write down their ideas about the following question: “What kind of support do you need to provide innovative teaching at your school?" Then, we asked them to discuss the ideas generated and finally, to rank the ideas based on a five-point Likert scale (1 for the least interesting idea and 5 for the most interesting one). The teachers generated 121 ideas in total. The clustering was done during the session by the researchers (the alternative, to have the teachers do it, was rejected because of time limitations). After the session, we invited the teachers to cluster the ideas in a Web-based application called Websort[3]. The data are still being analysed.
- **Expected outcomes.** An inventory of teachers’ needs and requirements will be the outcome of this step. This inventory list will be used to as an input to design a recommender system which suits teachers’ needs the best.

2.2 Dataset-driven study

- **Goal.** The main goal is to validate the framework we propose which presents the important characteristics of a recommender system to be designed for teachers. We will elaborate the framework in details in Section 3.
- **Method.** An offline empirical study of different algorithms on a selected set of representative datasets is to be conducted. The offline experiments (data study) on educational datasets will be in terms of the popular metrics often used to evaluate the performance of recommender systems.
- **Variables to be measured.** Prediction accuracy and coverage of the generated recommendations are the variables to be measured in this step.
- **Description.** Based on the literature review and the interview study, we present a framework to identify the suitable recommender systems’ strategies to be applied for our target users which helped us to make an effective selection of the available educational datasets. The selected educational datasets for teachers to be studied are TravelWell [19], MACE[4], Organic.Edunet[5], TELeurope[6], OpenScout[7], digischool[8] and eTwinning[9].
- **Expected outcomes.** Initial results will indicate which of the recommender system algorithms suits teachers best and if the trust-based recommender system can help to deal with the sparse data in the used datasets.

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[3] http://uxpunk.com/websort/
[4] http://portal.mace-project.eu
[5] http://portal.organic-edunet.eu
[6] http://www.teleurope.eu/
[7] http://www.openscout.net
[8] http://www2.digischool.nl/leerling/vo
[9] http://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/index.htm

2.3 User evaluation study

- **Goal.** The goal is to study usability of the prototype by evaluating users' satisfaction.
- **Method.** The experiment will be done by a questionnaire through which end-users will be asked to provide feedback on the prototype.
- **Variables to be measured.** User evaluation will be in terms of interestingness (how much the end-users find the recommended content or people interesting) and value-addedness (how recommended content or people can help users to gain new knowledge or improve their current knowledge) [17].
- **Description.** Based on the outcomes, the prototype will be customized and improved so as to be able to deploy an improved release in a pilot study.
- **Expected outcomes.** Initial feedback by end-users on usability of the prototype is the outcome we expect.

2.4 Pilot study

- **Goal**. We aim to deploy the final release to test it under realistic and normal operational conditions with the end-users.
- **Method.** We compare the performance of a proposed recommender system based on our presented framework with classical collaborative filtering algorithms. Furthermore, we aim to study the structure of the teachers' networks to investigate how networks of teachers will evolve by use of social data. To evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed recommender system, we will compare the results in terms of total number of learning objects which have been visited, bookmarked, rated, etc. for two groups of users:
  - Those who are aided by recommender systems to access learning objects
  - Those who access learning objects directly from the repository, without the help of a recommender system.
- **Variables to be measured.** We will measure prediction accuracy and coverage of the generated recommendations, effectiveness in terms of total number of visited, bookmarked, or rated learning objects, as well as Indegree distribution used to study how the structure of the networks changes. For a node on a network, Indegree describes the number of coming edges (or relationships) to the node.
- **Expected outcomes.** We expect to obtain empirical data on prediction accuracy and coverage, to validate whether our proposed recommender system outperforms the classical CF algorithms. Another outcome will be the visualization of teachers' networks, to show how the network's structure evolves when relying on social data.

3 Conclusion and further work

In this paper, we described why teachers need to be supported to find the most suitable content or people for their needs and we introduced recommender systems as a potential solution to address this issue. We also argued that we need to overcome the sparsity problem when we aim to enhance the performance of recommender systems in the educational domain and particularly for teachers. Therefore, we presented our research questions and research method that mainly focus on a solution to tackle the sparsity problem. We already started to set up an offline empirical study to test different algorithms of recommender systems on the selected datasets. As for the requirement analysis, an interview study has been conducted for 18 teachers from the Netherlands who already have been invited to cluster their ideas by Websort, following up the group session we had with them (described in Section 2.1). Furthermore, we took advantage of the Open Discovery Space Summer School in Greece, in July 2012 to involve more teachers in the Websort study. As a result, we now have an extensive analysis of the requirements for teachers all over the Europe. We are currently investigating the data and will present outcomes of the study in a special issue of the RecSysTEL workshop that will be published by Springer.

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