

MSc project plan:
Intelligent Chat Agent for Q/A on
Programming using StackOverflow as
Knowledge base

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Master's Thesis Project Description
Master of Science in Applied Computer Science
5 ECTS
Department of Computer Science and Media Technology
Gjøvik University College, 2015

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Revision history

Version #	Description of change (why, what where - a few sentences)
0.1	First version: Problem description (Chapter 1)
0.2	Second version: Added sections to Chapters 2, 3 and 4. Added appendix for the questionnaire used in IMT5251 Advanced Project Course (see p. 20). Updated Section 1.6: Planned contributions. Added content to the following Chapters: 4 and 7.
0.3	Added content to the following Chapters: 5 and 6

Abstract

When first starting to learn how to program, there is a lot of information to take in. There are a lot of different programming languages, some which have their own rules on how to build and execute the developed program. There are tons of different algorithms and different ways a problem can be solved, not to forget all the different terminologies and semantics that exists within the field. There is also a great amount of online resources on the Internet, ranging from encyclopaedias (e.g. Wikipedia), tutorial sites (e.g. TutorialsPoint, W3Schools, HackThisSite, etc), to online communities (e.g. StackOverflow, CodeProject, etc).

When looking for information, searching for an answer, or looking for a solution to a problem, it is not always that easy to come up with a good question (what defines a good question?). When learning to program in class, the questions may not come right away. Seeing something explained on the blackboard is quite different from actually understanding and doing it yourself. Looking for answers online can become quite time-consuming, since the relevance of the results returned by the search engine vary in a large degree. The answer to the question asked may not appear until page 10 of the returned results.

To help students learning programming, the goal of this thesis is to create a plug-in for the Learning Management System (LMS) Open Edx. The plug-in to be created is an Artificial Intelligent Chat Agent (aka. a ChatBot), and the students can then ask this Chat Agent questions related to programming. The Chat Agent will use StackOverflow as its Knowledge base, meaning the answers presented to the user will be based on the answers posted by users on StackOverflow. By using this Chat Agent, students can ask questions in the same way they would ask a teacher or a classmate, instead of having to use keywords when using a search engine. The goal of this thesis is to see if the Chat Agent can aid students that are learning programming, but also do research on it (e.g. trying to humanize the Chat Agent (Turing Test)). An example of the experiment would be to have two test groups (A/B testing), where the comparison would be on the grades of the students using the Chat Agent vs. those not using it, to see if the Chat Agent had any effect on the students grade.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Topic covered by the project

The goal of this thesis is to develop an Artificial Intelligent Chat Agent (aka. ChatBot), which will function as a plug-in in the LMS Open Edx¹. This Chat Agent is targeted at students learning programming, and will therefore be used to answer the students questions related to programming. The answers from the Chat Agent will be based on the content found in the online community StackOverflow². Since StackOverflow is one of the many communities belonging to the StackExchange network³, the Chat Agent can later on be expanded to cover information from other communities.

The hope is that this Chat Agent can aid the students in their learning progress, since they can ask the Chat Agent questions in the same way they would ask their teacher or their classmate. They do not have to think about keywords or read through a lot text, since the Chat Agent will try to answer their questions based on the answers it finds in the posted answers on StackOverflow.

From a research perspective, it would be interesting to see if the Chat Agent will have any effect on the learning outcome and what the students think of the Chat Agent, e.g. is it useful or would they just prefer to continue using search engines and look for the answer(s) themselves. As for the Artificial Intelligence (AI) side, it would be interesting to see what can be done to humanize the Chat Agent so that it could pass the Turing test⁴. It would also be interesting to look more deeply into the AI algorithms, to see in what way they can be improved or extended to cover a larger base of linguistics.

1.2 Keywords

Intelligent Agent, Chatbot, Natural language processing, Human-computer interaction, Education, Question-answering

1.3 Problem description

Can we find the answer if we do not know the question? The issue with most search engines today is that they are based on taking each search word (the Term) to create what is called a Dictionary (which contains all the words/terms searched for). It then looks through its content (documents, files, multimedia, etc.) and searches for each term, and returns those that contain at least one of the terms, ranking the results according to frequency of the given term. Although a given amount of search results is returned, there is no guarantee that the answer searched for are among the returned results. While programming, if an issue occurs, sometimes you can find the answer by using a few keywords, or simply copy/pasting the error message. But what do you search for when

¹Open Edx: <https://open.edx.org/>

²StackOverflow: <http://stackoverflow.com/>

³You can see all the StackExchange communities here: <http://stackexchange.com/sites>.

⁴A Turing Test is a test where a human is asked to converse with a unknown party, and then later on decide whether the party was a human or a computer ([p. 2][1]).

your question is more abstract? What do you search for when you have a question, but are struggling with phrasing it in a way that a search engine can understand? What do you do when you have a question that a teacher or a classmate could easily answer, but the search engine cannot?

With a Chat Agent, you do not have to think about keywords, phrases or "words best describing the problem". You can just ask the question you want an answer to. You also get anonymity with a Chat Agent. You can ask all sorts of questions, no matter how dumb you feel they are, because the Chat Agent is there to help.

A keypoint to remember is that the Chat Agent is intended to function as a help tool (e.g. FAQ FINDER [2] and Bzz [3]), and not as a replacement for the teacher (e.g. CALMsystem [4]).

1.4 Justification, motivation and benefits

With the advancement of programming and the increase of different languages, libraries and functionality, it can be hard for a teacher to cover all topics. It can also be hard for a student to grasp everything at once and understand everything the code does. Although there is a vast amount of online resources on the Internet, finding what you need can take a lot of time, but when using a Chat Agent, you can just ask the question and get the answer right away. Since the Chat Agent will be based on Hidden Markov Model (HMM), it can remember everything previously discussed in the conversation, increasing the chance of it helping the student finding the desired answer. The Chat Agent can also help the teachers, e.g. when running exercises in class, students can use the Chat Agent to find answer to the simpler questions, and then ask the teacher for help on the more advanced and problematic issues.

One example is the paper by [3] where they used an existing ChatBot called Bzz for answering adolescents' questions related to sex, drugs and alcohol. Their study showed that the users used the ChatBot a lot⁵, and that the users felt it was faster and better than information lines and search engines. [5] says that a ChatBot can be easier to converse with due to its anonymity. Furthermore, teachers can look at the conversation logs to see what the students have discussed, to be able to map the problems and see how students learn.

[6, p. 268] did two case studies where they compared the use of ChatBots and e-learning in relation to Information Security. They measured the ChatBot experience qualitatively, and 70% of the users found the ChatBot useful and would use one in the future. However, quantitatively they found no significant difference between those using a ChatBot and those using e-learning. CSIEC (documented in [7]) is a ChatBot developed for learning English, and was tested in [8]. The students achieved a very high score at the exam, but as the authors note, CSIEC was tested only between two tests (and there is also a chance of bias, since one of the authors is also the developer of CSIEC).

⁵"42,217 conversations with the chatbot; thus, an average of 11.3 conversations with each lasting 3 minutes and 57 seconds" [p. 516][3].

1.5 Research questions

- How was the Chat Agent perceived by the user (e.g. using the Chat Agent vs. using a search engine)?
- Did the Chat Agent help the user understand/learn more about programming?
- By using A/B testing, is there a (statistical) improvement from the students using the Chat Agent, vs. those not using it?
- In a given amount of executed queries, how many correct results were presented to the user?
- In what way can the conversation pattern (and algorithms used) be improved to pass a Turing test?
- In what way can the technology (i.e. the plug-in) be improved?
- When retrieving question-answer(s) from StackOverflow, some questions may be closed due to it being a duplicate. Can this data be used in any way to see what is defined by the StackOverflow community as a good question?

1.6 Planned contributions

To create an Artificial Intelligent Chat Agent for Question-Answering (Q/A) on programming by using StackOverflow as its knowledge base. This chat agent will function as a plug-in in the LMS system Open Edx. The external resources are content accessible on StackOverflow, libraries for content retrieval from StackOverflow, lexical word mappings (e.g. WordNet⁶), word filtering (to be decided) and available resources from Open Edx.

The Master thesis will be an extension of a prototype currently being developed in IMT5251 Advanced Project Course. This prototype just takes the users question and looks for matches on StackOverflow. The answer that is marked as correct (or the most top-voted one, if no answers are marked) will be returned and displayed to the user. Part of the contribution is to make this prototype more intelligent, by using AI and do research on the implemented technology (e.g. trying to humanize the Chat Agent (Turing Test⁷)). Part of the reason for wanting to humanize the Chat Agent is because the target group are students who are learning programming. It would be interesting to see if having this tool available can help them learn and understand more about programming. An attempt to confirm this will be by having an experiment with two test groups (A/B testing), where the comparison would be on the grades of the students using the Chat Agent vs. those not using it.

Since this is such a narrow and specific field, the Chat Agent will be based on the Artificial Intelligence (AI) algorithms Hidden Markov Model (HMM) and Bayesian network (Bayes Net). These are chosen because they have been used for a very long time and there is a great deal of research out there on using these for linguistics and Chat Agents. It could of course be interesting to look at newer or different AI algorithms, but the issue

⁶WordNet: <https://wordnet.princeton.edu/>

⁷For the record, it should be noted that most ChatBots fail the Turing test, and this is extremely hard to achieve. Therefore, being able to pass the test might not be possible, but I want at least the Chat Agent to be humanoid enough so that the users feel comfortable conversing with it.

is that these may not have an adequate amount of research and testing in relation to linguistics. It is therefore in my opinion safer to go with HMM and Bayes Net, to ensure completion of the thesis.

The final part of the planned contribution is to research and analyse the definition of a good question. The StackExchange community has a wide amount of sites, with a high level of professional expertise and strict rules for posting questions. Here, questions can be closed or put on hold, based on the questions asked. Some examples are duplicates, questions that are too broad, or marked off-topic [9], [10]. By analysing the posted questions and those asked by the students, could it be possible that the Chat Agent can help students ask better questions? An example scenario would be a programming lecture teaching incrementation. For a student wanting to learn more about this (presuming the student has no previous knowledge on the topic), a natural question would perhaps be to ask Q1) "What is incrementation?" or Q2) "How to increment?". If you input these questions into StackOverflow, you get approximately 31.600 results for both⁸. Furthermore, the first results may not even be relevant. The natural progression would perhaps be then to add to the question "...in programming". This reduces the returned results to 3.083 for Q1, and 2.715 for Q2. This example can be extended even further, e.g. by adding the programming language (e.g.: C++), the results are now halved, with an amount of 1.429 for Q1 and 1.610 for Q2. This simple example proves that knowing how to phrase a good question can have a real impact of the results you get, and as stated in [11], coming up with a problem can be the hardest part.

⁸This search was executed 29.11.2015, on StackOverflow.com.

2 Related work

- 2.1 Chat Agent vs. Search Engine**
- 2.2 Chat Agents for Learning and Education**
- 2.3 Turing Test**
- 2.4 Question-Answering (Q/A): What defines a good question?**

3 Choice of methods

3.1 Survey and Interview

3.2 A/B testing as an experimental method

3.3 Question-Answering (Q/A) model

3.4 Quantitative comparison of the students results

4 Milestones, deliverables and resources

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1.8. Thesis contribution

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2.2. Artificial Intelligence (AI) for Chat Agents

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2.5. Turing test: Humanizing the AI

3. Methodology

3.1. Hidden Markov Model (HMM)

3.2. Bayesian network (Bayes Net)

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3.4. Survey and Interview

¹Although it is called "Topic covered" in this report, it may be more appropriate to call it "Research area" in the Master thesis.

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4.2 Obtaining the desired knowledge

The most important key element in this thesis will be the development of the Chat Agent, since it is the focus of my thesis. Preliminary work has already been done in the course IMT5251 Advanced Project Work, where a prototype is being developed. The prototype runs in Open Edx, as an XBlock. Put shortly, the XBlock runs as an Fragment in Open Edx, allowing developers to add their own content which then can be re-used in multiple systems³. As previously mentioned, the prototype developed is a simplistic version, meaning there is no AI. The prototype will simply take the users input (the question) and copy/paste it to search for matching questions on StackOverflow. It will then return the first result, where the answer the user is presented with will either be the answer marked as correct, or the top-voted answer (if no answer is selected as correct by original poster). Students from the 1. and 2. year (who are learning to program) will test the prototype in the beginning of December, and afterwards fill out a questionnaire (the questionnaire is shown in Appendix A.2). In addition, some will test the prototype while I observe them.

This means that most of the development needed during the master thesis will be to

²Whichever is the appropriate format for the Applied Computer Science Master thesis.

³For more on XBlock, see <http://edx.readthedocs.org/projects/xblock-tutorial/en/latest/overview/index.html>

implement the AI and for it to be able to use WordNET for semantics. This would probably take a whole calendar month, but it depends on the actual hours invested. If I work between 6-8 hours each day (40+ hours each week), then this should be at least operational at latest mid-February. The reason for this extended time is to ensure I have time to setup and test the AI properly before allowing students to test them to ensure the collected data is valid. When it comes to equipment, I already have most of what I need, since I am already working on the prototype (development is done in Arch Linux). I also have a USB stick with Arch Linux installed, so that I can work on my laptop in case something should happen to my Desktop. I have also acquired a student license for PyCharm Professional⁴ which is valid for 1 year (until 25. November 2016). I am also aware of people that have the required knowledge who I can ask for help, such as my supervisor Simon McCallum, Sule Yildirim-Yayilgan, Mariusz Nowostawski and Rune Hjelsvold.

The user testing will of course require students to be willing to partake and test the Chat Agent. The plan is to use A/B testing, so that only part of the students have access to and can use this Chat Agent. One thing that may affect the end results are the knowledge level of the users, which means that even if there is an increase in the end results, it may not be because of the Chat Agent. The solution to account for this issue is by having the users also grade their own knowledge level, from being novice to expert (e.g. having programmed for years). Although there is not a set time limit for required use, if the Chat Agent is not in use, there will not be enough test data. However, the Chat Agent will be available from around February to May, and participation may not be that high if there is a weekly requirement for usage. A solution could be to require the participants to at least use the Chat Agent for at least 10-20 hours each calendar month. If there then are 20-30 participants, that means the Chat Agent will have a usage of 200-600 hours each month. Which in turn should provide a good amount of test data. There will be at least three surveys for the participants, the first when they start using the Chat Agent, the second when testing is halfway and the last at the end, to see if there is a correlation between usage, their results and the students own observations.

⁴ PyCharm: <https://www.jetbrains.com/pycharm/>.

4.3 Produced deliverables

4.3.1 Hours needed by me

Product	Time (calendar)	Time ('man-hours') ⁵	Version #	Notes
MSc thesis report	January - May	125-200 Hours	v0.1	Draft should be presented to supervisor monthly
1) Chat Agent (AI research)	January - February	50-75 Hours	v0.1	Should be available at latest Mid-February for course start-up
2) Chat Agent (AI development)	January - February	50-75 Hours	v0.1	Should be available at latest Mid-February for course start-up
Meeting w/ supervisor	January - May	10-20 Hours	v0.1	Once a week, estimated between 30-60 minutes
Analyse questions on StackExchange	February - May	50-100 Hours	v0.1	One way of doing this would be to use the Chat Agent to e.g. retrieve questions that are closed
Read various scientific papers	January - May	50-100 Hours	v0.1	Read up on the latest published papers to keep up-to-date
Process student surveys	Jan/Feb, March/April and April/May	10-30 Hours	v0.1	Surveys delivered by students participating in the A/B Testing
Process Student/ Chat Agent interactions	February - May	60-80 Hours	v0.1	Should at least try to keep a steady update on the current data on a weekly basis

4.3.2 Hours by others

Who?	Time (calendar)	Time ('man-hours') ⁶	Version #	Notes
Supervisor	January-May	10-20 Hours	v0.1	Once a week, estimated between 30-60 minutes
Students	February-April/May	40-80 Hours	v0.1	Students interaction with the Chat Agent (time per person)
Students	Jan/Feb, March/April and April/May	1.5 - 3 hours	v0.1	Filling out survey/questionnaire (per student)

⁵Total time spent during set period.

⁶Total time spent during set period.

5 Feasibility study

As mentioned in 4.2, the prototype has already been developed, and in addition, two 1. year Bachelor students have tested it and given feedback. Through this feedback I can ensure that the next version is more desirable for the students, and the main focus of the development will be on the AI. Aside from having a personal interest in AI, I have also had two courses in Machine Learning at Gjøvik University College (GUC). This involved development of both single and hybrid algorithms to solve different tasks. E.g. in the course IMT4641 Computational Forensics I developed a program that analysed Android SQLite databases by using Fuzzy rules and Decision Tree. Furthermore, I already know what type of hybrid algorithm I will use for the Chat Agents AI; HMM and Bayes Net. There is also a lot of research available on using these for language processing (and since HMM uses states, it can also remember the conversation history).

When it comes to the research for questions (and what defines a good question), there is already a lot of data available through the StackExchange community. This means that I do not have to rely solely on one of the community pages for my research. E.g. if StackOverflow is down for maintenance, I can just switch my focus to one of the other sites in the community. I also intend to add an editable backend for the teachers in the Chat Agent, so that they can themselves decide which of the StackExchange sites the Chat Agent should use. This way, it will not be locked to only one course (or one site), which also means that I can suggest for other professors at GUC (and potentially NTNU) that they could participate in using the Chat Agent. Furthermore, this can also increase the amount of students using the Chat Agent, meaning I can get more data to analyse and compare to see if there is any benefit from using the Chat Agent.

6 Risk analysis

There are two points that can have a major negative impact on my Master thesis. The first is delay of the AI (if it is not ready within time), and the second is not having enough users to test the Chat Agent. The greatest problem when developing and training AI is the time it takes to make it work properly, ensuring it can handle invalid data and that it does not use too much time processing and presenting the result to the user. To account for this, the goal should not be to have a 100% perfect AI. The most important part in the beginning would be that the AI works. This way, the students can get started by testing the prototype version with the current AI, and then give feedback if something is not working satisfactory. However, if the AI is too stupid or give too many useless results, this can cause the students to get a negative view and stop using the Chat Agent.

During the prototype testing in IMT5251, although the students liked the concept, they did not find the prototype to be useful or preferable compared to a search engine. This is also one of the arguments for why AI should be implemented before releasing it to the students. To ensure a to negative bias when using it, students will be informed that it is still a prototype under development, so the results presented in the beginning may not be that satisfactory. Which leads me back to the issue in regards to having enough testers. As noted in 5, a way to get a lot of students to participate is to try to get as many course responsables as possible interested in using it in their courses. Furthermore, should the students drop out, then perhaps those who have not tried it might be willing to participate.

Since AI is a very large field, it can easily become complex and one can also get distracted and lose focus (or get hung up in what one could call "eye candy" features). Therefore, I think the best would be in the beginning to have weekly meetings with my supervisor. This way, the supervisor will not only know that work is being done and progress made, but he can also ensure that the work I have done and are planning to do is what I should focus on. It will also be helpful, because if I get issues which I cannot solve (and supervisor is not available at the time), I know that within the next week I have a scheduled meeting and can then focus on something else in the meantime.

7 Ethical and legal considerations

There are no legal considerations in this project. All user data be anonymized, and the only data logged by the Chat Agent is the questions that the students ask, and the answers they are presented with. The greatest ethical concern in this thesis is the invested amount of hours testing the Chat Agent. The students will have projects, deadlines and exams to relate to, so requirement of 10-20 hours of usage each month may be too much. On the other hand, if the Chat Agent is not used at all, there may not be enough test data to prove whether or not it had any effect on the students learning curve. If one were to set a timed requirement, it could increase the chance of stress and performance anxiety, ending with students declining to participate or withdrawing before the testing is completed. It is important for this thesis both that the Chat Agent is used, but also that the users want to use it! Another concern in relation to time is that there is no guarantee that the Chat Agent have any beneficial effects on learning. The results may show that it is faster or easier to use search engines, meaning students have lost time they could have invested elsewhere.

For the validity of the end results, there is also the question of whether or not the Chat Agent actually had any effect. Students past knowledge can effect the average outcome, for better or worse. During the thesis, the testing will be conducted by using A/B testing, meaning only a selected group will have access to the Chat Agent. If a large part of the group have a lot of knowledge from before, the end results may be mostly False-Positives. Because even though the data show improvement, they improved because they build on previous knowledge, and not by use of the Chat Agent. To catch this, one of the questions for each test user will be to grade their own knowledge level to scale the end results. There is also the issue that students who might benefit from the Chat Agent, will not be able to use it. Novice students, with little to none programming knowledge may find it unfair that they are not the primary selected group. However, by not selecting by type (e.g. knowledge) one can avoid affecting the data and the end results.

A Appendix

A.1 Acronyms

AI Artificial Intelligence. 1, 3, 10–12

Bayes Net Bayesian network. 3, 4

HMM Hidden Markov Model. 2–4

LMS Learning Management System. i, 1

Q/A Question-Answering. 3

A.2 IMT5251 Advanced Project Course: Questionnaire

Questionnaire/survey for ChatBot testing

Are you a (cross the one correct for you):

<input type="checkbox"/> 1. year student		<input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor
<input type="checkbox"/> 2. year student		<input type="checkbox"/> Master
<input type="checkbox"/> 3. year student		<input type="checkbox"/> Other? If so, what? _____

On a scale from 1 - 5 (*1 being novice and 5 being knowledgeable*), how much do you know about programming? _____

On a scale from 1 - 5 (*1 being novice and 5 being skilled*), how good are you at programming?

Do you have any previous experience with programming (*before bachelor*)? __ Yes __ No

If yes, how many months/years? _____

Where did you have this experience (*self-taught, school, work*)? _____

When looking for answers to something you do not know or understand, grade the following from 1 - 5 (*1 being used the most, 5 being used the least*):

Ask the teacher	_____	
Ask a classmate/friend	_____	
Look for answers in books/library	_____	
Use a search engine	_____	Which one(s)? _____
Use an online forum/community	_____	Which one(s)? _____

When using a search engine, on a scale from 1 - 5, how satisfied are you with the results you get (*1 very satisfied, 5 not very*)? _____

Why are you so satisfied/dissatisfied with the search engine(s) you are using?

ChatBot questions:

Having now tried the ChatBot prototype, the following are some questions about your experience.

What are your thoughts on having this tool available during class (*e.g. would it be helpful to have it*)?

If you were to compare the ChatBot against a search engine, which one performs better and why?

When asking the ChatBot Questions, did you get the answers you wanted (*e.g. did it return meaningful answers*)?

How many times did you have to re-phrase your question to get an answer? _____
(leave space for multiple questions)

- Do you think that this is acceptable? _____
- How many re-phrases do you find acceptable? _____

What did you like when using this ChatBot?

What did you not like when using this ChatBot?

In what ways can this be improved? I.e. what can be done to increase the chance that you will use it?

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