

SCHOOL OF COMPUTATION,
INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY —
INFORMATICS

TECHNISCHE UNIVERSITÄT MÜNCHEN

Master's Thesis in Informatics

**FLOps: Practical Federated Learning via
Automated Orchestration (on the Edge)**

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TODO

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I confirm that this master's thesis is my own work and I have documented all sources and material used.

Munich, 15.09.2024

Alexander Malyuk

Acknowledgments

Abstract

Kurzfassung

Contents

Acknowledgments	iii
Abstract	iv
Kurzfassung	v
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Problem Statement	1
1.2 Motivation	2
1.3 Objectives	3
1.4 Contribution	4
1.5 Thesis Structure	5
2 Background	6
2.1 Federated Learning	6
2.1.1 Basics	7
2.1.2 Architectures	10
2.1.3 Research	10
2.1.4 Industry	10
2.1.5 Frameworks & Libraries	10
2.1.6 Flower	10
2.2 Machine Learning Operations	10
2.2.1 DevOps	10
2.2.2 MLOps	10
2.2.3 MLflow	10
2.3 Orchestration	10
2.3.1 Fundamentals	10
2.3.2 ML Containerization & Orchestration	10
2.3.3 Oakestra	10
2.4 Related Work	10
3 Requirements Analysis	11

4	System Design	12
5	Object Design	13
6	Evaluation	14
6.1	Rationale	14
6.1.1	Chosen Experiments	14
6.2	Experimental Setup	14
6.2.1	Monolith	14
6.2.2	Multi-Cluster	14
6.2.3	Evaluation Procedure	14
6.3	Results	14
6.3.1	Basics	14
6.3.2	Image Builder	14
6.3.3	Different ML Frameworks/Libraries & Datasets	14
6.3.4	Multi-cluster & HFL	14
7	Conclusion	15
7.1	Limitations & Future Work	15
7.1.1	Federated Learning via FLOps	15
7.1.2	Complementary Components & Integrations	15
8	DELME tum example	16
8.1	Section	16
8.1.1	Subsection	16
	Abbreviations	18
	List of Figures	19
	List of Tables	20
	Bibliography	21

1 Introduction

The number of smart devices has been rapidly growing in the last several years. Improvements in connectivity (Cloud Computing & Internet of Things—IoT), connection speeds (5G), and computing power enable this increasing fleet of edge/mobile devices to generate enormous amounts of data (BigData). Combined with the expansion of AI/ML, this data is a driving factor for current successful workflows and future advancements. This complementing union of technologies plays a key role in elevating various domains, from agriculture and healthcare to education and the security sector, to Industry 4.0 and beyond. Diverse and complex challenges arise from this swiftly evolving landscape. [3]

1.1 Problem Statement

With great access to data comes great responsibility that can be easily exploited. Many of the aforementioned machines are personal user devices or belong to companies and organizations that handle customer or internal resources. These devices store and handle sensitive private data.

In classical (large-scale) Machine Learning, data gets sent from client devices to a centralized server, which usually resides in the cloud. The collected data is used on the server to train ML models or perform inference serving. This approach provides direct access to this sensitive data and the power to trace back its origin, creating a breach of privacy. [11]

Governments and organizations have established laws and regulations to prohibit potential abuse of sensitive data. Examples include the European Parliament regulation to protect personal data [15] or the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) [10]. These measures aim to support cooperation between organizations and nations while protecting trade secrets. However, some laws and regulations prohibit sharing or moving data to other countries or even off-premises. [11]

Ignoring and no longer using this large amount of data would heavily limit current workflows and further developments for many data-dependent and data-hungry technologies. In 2017, a team of Google researchers introduced Federated Learning (FL) as one possible solution to utilize sensitive data while keeping it private. Instead of collecting the data on a server and training ML models centralized, in FL, the model

training occurs directly on the client devices. Afterward, the individually trained models get sent to the server, which combines the collected models into a single shared one. This so-called global model can then be distributed to the clients again for further training cycles. Therefore, FL enables training a shared model on sensitive data while keeping that data secure on the local client devices. [12]

While many researchers are actively engaged in the field of FL, the majority of them are focused on enhancing existing FL components, strategies, and algorithms or devising better ways of doing FL. However, there is a noticeable scarcity of work that concentrates on the crucial aspects of the initial setup, deployment, and usability of FL. We delve into this issue in greater detail in the dedicated background section (2.1.3).

Because FL is a relatively modern technique, it lacks a sophisticated production-grade ecosystem that includes frameworks and libraries that improve ease of use by automating its setup and execution. As a result, contributing to the field of FL or reproducing findings is a task ranging from non-trivial to improbable due to the lack of documented steps regarding setup, deployment, management, and execution. Instead of using a shared set of tools for bootstrapping to make progress on novel work more efficiently, one needs to set up and manage FL from the ground up. Note that a small set of emerging libraries and frameworks exists for FL. Instead of orchestrating FL on real distributed devices, they focus on executing FL algorithms and processes, often via virtual simulations. Not to mention utilizing more advanced techniques to increase productivity that other domains have already been using for several years, such as modern DevOps practices like continuous deployment. We review existing FL tools in detail in the dedicated section (2.1.5).

1.2 Motivation

Building or contributing to a novel FL framework or library focusing on the previously mentioned challenges could soften or entirely alleviate those problems. We are talking about a tool that sees Docker [6] and Kubernetes [9] as role models and strives to be comparable to them but for the discipline of FL. It should specialize in the setup, deployment, component management, and automation, in short, FL orchestration. Allowing researchers, developers, and end-users to set up, perform, reproduce, and experiment with FL in a more accessible way.

The goal of this tool should be to automate and simplify complex tasks, reducing the required level of expertise in various domains, ranging from ML/FL, dependency management, containerization technologies, and automation to orchestration. Such a tool would empower less experienced individuals to participate and contribute to the field of FL. As a result, FL could be adapted and used by more people in more areas.

This tool would streamline and accelerate existing workflows and future progress by utilizing reliable automation to avoid error-prone manual tasks. With its potential to optimize, standardize and unify processes, our envisioned tool could become a significant part of the emerging FL ecosystem, contributing to the development and progress of the entire field.

1.3 Objectives

The motivation allows us to distill the following key objectives for such a tool.

Improve Accessibility

Making FL more accessible by abstracting away and automating complexities, enables more individuals to engage with it. Expanding FL to more areas will increase its usage and user base, raising general interest and relevance for its field, which should aid its development.

Utilize Automation

Automating tedious, error-prone, and repetitive manual tasks necessary to perform FL will free up time and resources for more critical work, leading to further advancements.

Prioritize Tangible Applicability

As we discuss in (2.1.3), FL struggles with a gap between research/virtual-simulation and practical application in real production environments. This tool should focus on being usable in real physical conditions on distributed devices. It should be feasible to incorporate this tool into existing workflows.

Embrace Plasticity

Because FL is such a young field, it faces constant change. Naturally, our tool should welcome change in the form of extendability and adaptability. This tool should be flexible and applicable to a myriad of use cases and scenarios. It should be easy to modify to accommodate evolving needs. Likewise, this tool should profit from existing technologies to offer a higher level of quality than creating everything from square one.

1.4 Contribution

We introduce FLOps to fulfill the objectives above. It enables individuals to use, develop, and evaluate tangible FL. FLOps enriches FL with modern best practices from automation, DevOps/MLOps, and orchestration. FLOps improves accessibility by enabling users without experience in FL, MLOps, or orchestration to do FL and still benefit from these technologies via automated orchestration.

To do FL, users simply provide a link to their ML git repository. Note that this code needs to satisfy some simple structural prerequisites. This repository code gets automatically augmented by FLOps to support FL. FLOps creates a containerized image with all necessary dependencies to do FL training. These images are automatically built and adhere to best practices, ensuring they are as fast and lightweight as possible. FLOps can build these images for multiple different target platforms. Thus, FL components can run on ARM edge-devices like Raspberry Pis or Nvidia Jetsons. FLOps enables FL on all devices that support containerization technologies like Docker [6] or containerd [5]. This approach eliminates the need for tedious device setup and the struggle to configure heterogeneous dependencies to match the necessary requirements for training, thereby streamlining the process and saving time.

FLOps automatically performs FL training based on the user-requested configuration. Users can, for example, specify resource requirements, the number of training rounds, the FL algorithm, the minimum number of participating client devices, and more. During runtime, users can observe this training process via a sophisticated GUI, which allows users to monitor, compare, store, export, share, and organize training runs, metrics, and trained models. FLOps can automatically build inference servers based on the trained model. This inference server can be pulled as a regular image. FLOps can also directly deploy this trained-model image as an inference server.

A multitude of diverse technologies and areas are necessary for FLOps to provide its services. Instead of reimplementing these complex features in a subpar fashion from scratch, we benefit from combining and extending existing solutions and technologies in unique and novel ways. This includes the use of Anaconda [1] and Buildah [4] to manage dependencies and build images. We utilize a pioneering FL framework called Flower [8] to execute the FL training loop. The mentioned runtime observability features are available via a mature MLOps tool called MLflow [13]. Because FL pushes model training to client devices, especially edge devices, we decided to use an orchestrator native to the edge environment. With the help of Oakestra [2], FLOps can deploy and orchestrate its components. FLOps is implemented as a separate addon for Oakestra. Because their interaction is based on general API endpoints and SLAs, FLOps can be modified to support other Orchestrators.

It is noteworthy that these different tools do not natively support each other. FLOps

combines them in unprecedented ways to achieve its goals. As an example, FLOps supports hierarchical FL (HFL), which is not directly supported or offered by Flower. To the best of our knowledge, FLOps is the first work that combines Flower with MLflow and allows HFL, as well as automatically converts ML code into FL enabled containerized images.

As far as we know, the term FLOps, besides being a measurement unit for computer performance (Floating point operations per second), has not been used or applied to FL unlike MLOps has been used to describe DevOps techniques for ML. The goal of this work is to showcase the benefits of utilizing the mentioned techniques and open the doors for future developments for FL.

Besides the end-user perspective, FLOps is intended to be a foundational piece of software that can be easily modified and extended for developers and researchers. We put a lot of effort into writing high quality code, using state of the art libraries and frameworks. FLOps includes many development-friendly features. We enforce proper styling and typing via formatters and linters, including CI. Ready-made extendable multi-platform images and services automate development and evaluation workflows. These images, as well as the entire code, are made available on GitHub [7]. We also added base images with optional development flags to speed up the build and execution times of FLOps so that developers can verify and check their changes more rapidly.

On top of that we also implemented a new CLI tool for Oakestra and FLOps from the grounds up [14]. It is used to interact with Oakestra's and FLOps APIs. Besides that this configurable CLI tool also is capable of visualizing current processes in a human friendly way in real time as well as trigger evaluation runs and other automated tasks like installing necessary dependencies.

1.5 Thesis Structure

TODO

2 Background

As mentioned in the contributions section, FLOps combines and uses a large set of technologies from different disciplines. To properly understand FLOps as a whole and why it combines these techniques, it is necessary to analyze them individually. This enables us to form a common understanding, including critical background knowledge of their benefits and downsides. Only afterward does it make sense to discuss how FLOps merges them to create something new.

This background chapter provides a general overview for each sector and discuss aspects that are necessary for FLOps in greater detail. We start with exploring the field of federated learning. FL is the core task at hand that FLOps aims to optimize. A thorough understanding of this discipline is required to figure out where it has shortcomings. To improve upon these weaknesses, we study the established set of best practices from DevOps and MLOps. Techniques like automation and CI/CD require infrastructure and resources. Orchestration allows us to provision, manage, and deploy such infrastructure and resources. We review the field of orchestration technologies and provide a short overview of Oakestra [2] as the chosen platform. In the final background section, we take a look at and compare a couple of existing pieces of work that resemble FLOps.

2.1 Federated Learning

This section starts with the fundamental building blocks and terminologies of FL. FLOps is orchestrated via Oakestra [2], which uses an unconventional three-tiered structure that allows support for geographical clusters. We have the opportunity to benefit from this unique composition and apply FL to it. To do so, we investigate more advanced concepts in FL, focusing on different FL architectures.

With this solid FL understanding, we review the research landscape of FL. We look at active and popular research directions and point out under-explored aspects, and weak points. We briefly look at FL in industry. Followed by a detailed comparison of existing FL frameworks and libraries. We conclude the section on FL by providing an overview of Flower [8], our FL framework of choice.

2.1.1 Basics

Note that we assume the reader to be familiar with basic machine learning concepts.

The majority of this subsection is based on the 2022 book 'Federated Learning - A Comprehensive Overview of Methods and Applications' [11]. It captured and discusses the history and progress of FL research and state of the art FL techniques.

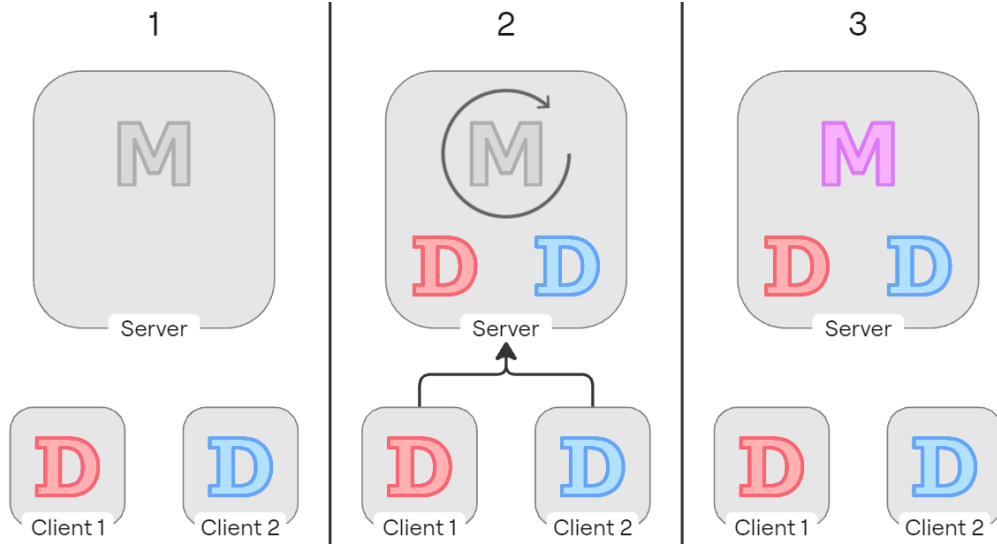


Figure 2.1: Centralized ML model training

Figure 2.1 depicts the classic centralized ML model training process. Starting from (1), each of the clients has its own data (D). The Server hosts the ML model. The model (M) is not yet trained (gray). In (2) the clients send their data over to the server. The server is now able to train the model using data from both clients. (3) depicts the final state after training. The model has been trained. (The pink/purple color represents that both data sources, red and blue, have been used during training.) Without any policies in place the client data remains on the server, thus be in danger of being exploited.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, this centralized approach leads to breaches of privacy. FL was introduced to be able to use sensitive data on client devices for training ML models while keeping that data private and comply with laws and regulations.

Figure 2.2 shows the basic FL training loop. The first difference is in the naming of the components. In FL the server is oftentimes referred to as an aggregator and clients as learners. Note that it is still common to use the terms 'server' and 'clients'. We prefer to use 'aggregator' and 'learners' because it highlights that these are FL components. This naming choice is also used in FLOps and helps with comprehension, because FLOps

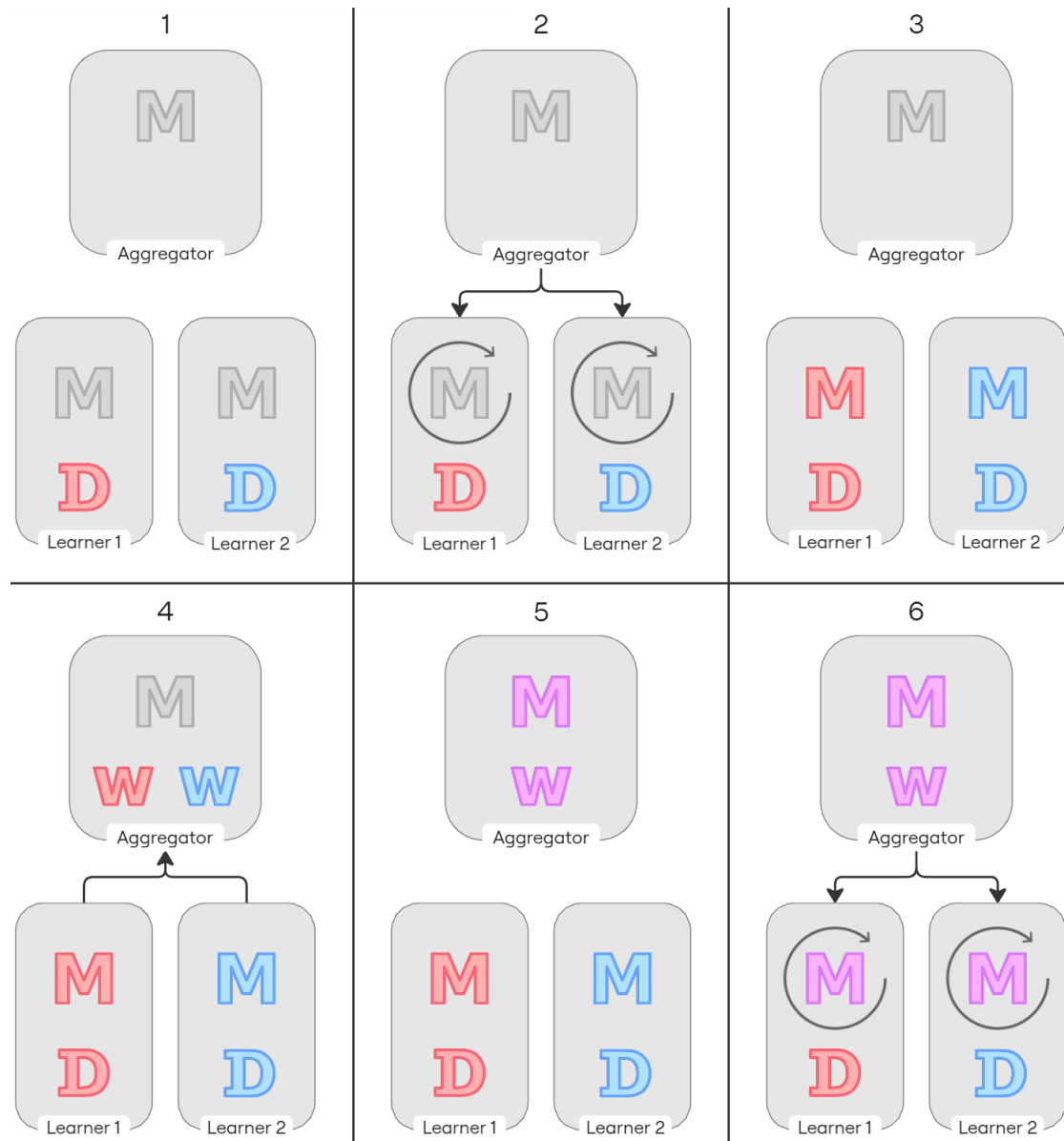


Figure 2.2: Basic Federated Learning

uses a manifold of components, including non-FL servers and clients. An additional difference is that all components need to know and possess the ML model. Initially at (1) all Models are untrained, thus usually randomly initialized. At (2) the aggregator starts the first FL training cycle by telling the learners to start their local training. The local training rounds are completed at (3) - the 'M's are now colored. We remind that ML models are (usually) a static lightweight set of programming logic, including layer specification in DNNs, or training configuration, including hyperparameters like learning step sizes, what loss type or activation function to use. Model weights and biases on the other hand can be seen in isolated. A model without weights is useless because these weights and biases are what gets trained/changed/configured in the first place and allow the model to fulfill its intended use like prediction, inference or generation tasks. These weights and biases are the major contributor to the overall size (space utilization) of a trained model. Because in classic ML/FL the model structure stays static one can simply transmit the weights between aggregators and learners. In (4) the learners have extracted their model weights and send them to the aggregator. The aggregator now has access to these weights but not to the sensitive data that was used to train these weights. That is how FL can profit from sensitive data while maintaining its privacy. Note that there are still attack vectors that allow exposing sensitive client information by abusing this weight-based aggregation process. We briefly discuss this and other FL security aspects in the subsection about FL research. In (5) the server aggregates these collected weights into a new 'global' weight which gets applied to its own model instance. The result is a global model that was trained for one FL cycle. In (6) the aggregator sends its global weights back to the learners. The learners apply these weights to their local model instance to make it identical to the aggregator's global model. Now the FL training loop could terminate and the learners or servers could use their own global model copy for inference, or as depicted in (6) another FL training cycle begins. There can be arbitrary many FL cycles, similar to conventional training rounds in classic ML. Sooner or later FL training will have to stop, otherwise the accuracy and loss will get worse due to overfitting. (Assuming the available training data is finite and stays the same.)

TODO maybe add a UML diagram that shows the state changes or the different interactions between different components (?)

TODO showcase and explain the underlying classic/basic FL algorithms (FedAvg), show the formulas, including the model aggregation one.

2.1.2 Architectures

2.1.3 Research

2.1.4 Industry

2.1.5 Frameworks & Libraries

2.1.6 Flower

2.2 Machine Learning Operations

2.2.1 DevOps

2.2.2 MLOps

2.2.3 MLflow

2.3 Orchestration

2.3.1 Fundamentals

2.3.2 ML Containerization & Orchestration

2.3.3 Oakestra

2.4 Related Work

3 Requirements Analysis

4 System Design

5 Object Design

6 Evaluation

6.1 Rationale

6.1.1 Chosen Experiments

6.2 Experimental Setup

6.2.1 Monolith

6.2.2 Multi-Cluster

6.2.3 Evaluation Procedure

6.3 Results

6.3.1 Basics

6.3.2 Image Builder

6.3.3 Different ML Frameworks/Libraries & Datasets

6.3.4 Multi-cluster & HFL

7 Conclusion

7.1 Limitations & Future Work

7.1.1 Federated Learning via FLOps

7.1.2 Complementary Components & Integrations

8 DELME tum example

8.1 Section

Acronyms must be added in `main.tex` and are referenced using macros. The first occurrence is automatically replaced with the long version of the acronym, while all subsequent usages use the abbreviation.

E.g. `\ac{TUM}`, `\ac{TUM}` \Rightarrow Technical University of Munich (TUM), TUM

For more details, see the documentation of the `acronym` package¹.

8.1.1 Subsection

See Table 8.1, Figure 8.1, Figure 8.2, Figure 8.3.

Table 8.1: An example for a simple table.

A	B	C	D
1	2	1	2
2	3	2	3

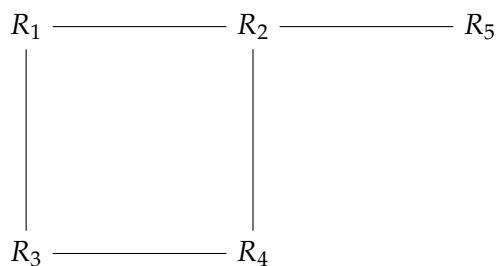


Figure 8.1: An example for a simple drawing.

¹<https://ctan.org/pkg/acronym>



Figure 8.2: An example for a simple plot.

```
SELECT * FROM tbl WHERE tbl.str = "str"
```

Figure 8.3: An example for a source code listing.

Abbreviations

TUM Technical University of Munich

List of Figures

2.1	Centralized ML model training	7
2.2	Basic Federated Learning	8
8.1	Example drawing	16
8.2	Example plot	17
8.3	Example listing	17

List of Tables

8.1	Example table	16
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