Machine Learning Practice

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Know Your Problem and your Data

Spend time understanding:
• The problem that you are trying to solve
• The questions that you need to answer
• The meaning behind the different parts of your data
• The costs for collecting / labeling data
• The costs for making different prediction errors
Know Your Data

The meaning behind your feature vectors, especially individual features

• What are their distributions?
• How do they correlate with one-another and with the thing you are trying to predict?
• Continuous or enumerated (or both)?
• How much data do you have / can you get?

Always spend time visualizing your data
Know Your Problem

• What type of a prediction problem are you facing?
• Supervised, Semi-supervised, Unsupervised
• Continuous, probabilistic or categorical prediction?
Know Your Approaches

• What is the right learning approach for the job?
  – Depends on the details of your data and on the details of your predictions

• Don’t be afraid to try simple approaches
  – Quick to implement
  – Depending on the problem, this may be the solution that you need
  – Either way, you will learn useful things about your problem
The Full Machine Learning Process

• Try a few quick solutions & do a bit of hand tuning
  – Identify the right representations, right approaches, and (approximately) the right hyper-parameters

• Grid search + cross-validation
  – Systematic testing of hyper-parameter options
  – May need multiple grid search runs

• Statistical comparisons
  – Across hyper-parameter choices (validation data sets)
  – Across modeling approaches (test data sets)
Over-fitting

It is easy to over-fit data sets!

• Primary issue: training set size is too small given the number of parameters that we trying to fit

• Always look at the over-fitting question by varying training set size

• Some methods have mechanisms that combat over-fitting directly

• Others need the data to be structured properly
Euclidean Distance

• Euclidean distance is at the center of many ML algorithms
• However, this metric is not always meaningful
• Especially an issue when we are working in high-dimensional feature spaces
• In these cases, manifold-sensitive approaches are appropriate
  – PCA, LLE, MDS, ISOMap, tSNE
• Or, approaches that don’t focus on the full feature space:
  – Trees, Forests
Make Your Argument

Your customer/supervisor may or may not care about the details of the methods used

• Be ready to talk about the high level of your analysis
  – Specific methods / hyper-parameters are probably not important

• Show data, including intermediate results

• Be honest about what works and what doesn’t
  – Specific examples + aggregate results
  – Make clear statistical arguments
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