



Open Multi-Agent Systems for Collaborative Web-Based Learning

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ABSTRACT

Web-based learning plays an important role in the modern teaching environment. Many Web-based tools are becoming available in this huge marketplace. Agent technology contributes substantially to this achievement. One of the fundamental problems facing both students and education services providers is how to locate and integrate these valuable services in such a dynamic environment. In this paper, I present mediator-based architecture to build open multi-agent applications for eLearning. An agent services description language is presented to enable services advertising and collaboration. The language exploits ontology of service domain, and provides the flexibility for developers to plug in any suitable constraint languages. Multiple matchmaking strategies based on agent service ontology are given to help agents finding appropriate service providers. The series of strategies consider various features of service providers, the nature of requirements, and more importantly the relationships among services.

Keywords: agent; mediator; service description; matching; online learning

INTRODUCTION

The World Wide Web has the largest collection of knowledge ever in mankind's history. It is one of the most important resources in modern education. With the success of search engines, such as Google, and the vast acceptance of online learning systems, such as WebCT, students and teachers can search text and images efficiently. These tools are changing our learning process in schools and universities

all over the world everyday. However, the Web has not reached its full potential. At its early stage, the Web is solely a huge collection of digital information. Nowadays, it is evolving into a huge growing marketplace for information providers and consumers. Agent technology makes a substantial contribution to this achievement.

However, how to find information providers and how to integrate information agents in such an open environment are new challenges. Information agents, such

as Ahoy (Shakes, Langheinrich & Etzioni, 1997), ShopBot (Doorenbos, Etzioni & Weld, 1997), and SportsFinder (Lu, Sterling & Wyatt, 1999), are programs that assist people in finding specific information on the Web. They are information service providers, which have the capabilities to find information for users, for example locating a person's homepage, finding the cheapest available prices for music CDs, or finding sports results of a team or a player. For a novice user, a challenge is how to find these services; for an information agent, the challenges are how to locate the service providers, and how to communicate with them to solve its tasks cooperatively. This is one of the basic problems facing designers of open, multi-agent systems for the Internet, the connection problem — finding the other agents who might have the information or other capabilities that you need (Decker, Sycara & Williamson, 1996).

In Genesereth and Ketchpel (1994), two basic approaches to this connection problem are distinguished: direct communication, in which agents handle their own coordination; and assisted coordination, in which agents rely on special system programs to achieve coordination. However in the Web application domain, where new agents might come into existence or existing agents might disappear at any time, only the latter approach promises the adaptability required to cope with the dynamic changes in the environment.

RELATED WORKS

Ontology

Ontologies are content theories about objects, their properties, and relationships among them that are possible in a specific domain of knowledge (Chandrasekaran, Josephson & Benjamins, 1999). In a given

domain, its ontology clarifies the structure of knowledge in the domain. It forms the heart of any system of knowledge representation for that domain. Without an ontology, or the formal conceptualisations, there cannot be any vocabulary for representing knowledge, let alone automatic knowledge reasoning and inference. An ontology gives the terms used in a certain domain, as well as their relationships, so that we can use these terms provided to assert specific propositions about a situation. For example, in the computer science education domain, we can represent a fact about a specific unit: unit SCC303, Software Engineering, is a third-year undergraduate unit, where SCC303 is an instance of the concept unit. Once we have the basis for representing propositions, we can also represent more advanced knowledge, such as hypothesize, believe, expect, etc. Thus, we can construct domain ontology step by step to describe the world.

Web Service Description Languages

Web services are Web-accessible programs and devices that not only provide information to a user, but enable a user to effect change in the world. Web services are among the most important resources on the Web, and they are garnering a great deal of interest from industry. Many emerging standards are being developed for low-level descriptions of Web services.

- *Web Service Description Language* provides a communication level description of the messages and protocols used by a Web service. WSDL is an XML format for describing network services as a set of endpoints operating on messages containing either document-oriented or procedure-oriented information. The operations and messages are described

in abstract, and then bound to a concrete network protocol and message format to define an endpoint. Related concrete endpoints are combined into abstract endpoints (services). WSDL is extensible to allow description of endpoints and their messages regardless of what message formats or network protocols are used to communicate.

- The huge collection of information on the Web is far beyond a person's ability to search and index. So machine-understandable data is a high priority to automatic processing online information. *Semantic web* is a step to define and link data on the Web in a way that it can be used by machines not just for display purposes, but for automation, integration and reuse of data across various applications.

WebCT

WebCT is one of the leading on-line education tools. It provides teachers a powerful and convenient way to build up websites dedicated to publishing teaching materials for their subjects; meanwhile it is also a place for students to feedback their progress. No wonder WebCT is widely accepted in various levels of education institutes, especially for long-distance learning.

However, WebCT is a closed system. It can only let the teachers and students in the same university or in the same class communicate with each other. In this point of view, WebCT has not taken the full advantage of the World Wide Web, which now is a fast-growing collection of services. WebCT is still based on the conventional client-server architecture. While the Web offers more flexible options, for example everyone on the Web could be an information provider and consumer at the

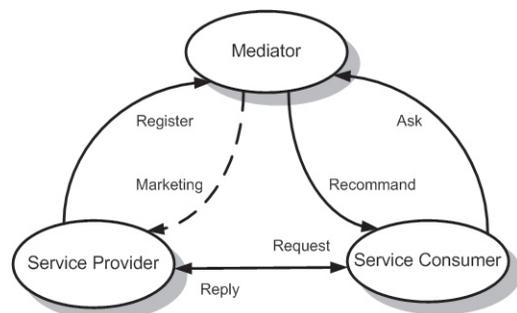
same time. Peer-to-peer communication is becoming the mainstream of on-line publishing and marketing. I believe this is the future trend for on-line education, because in such architecture teachers and students can easily swap their roles and learn from each other. In addition, this architecture is open for everyone to join in.

MEDIATOR-BASED ARCHITECTURE

I present a mediator-based middle agent architecture for agent services advertising and requesting. The architecture is given in Figure 1. A possible solution is a software mediator. A mediator is a software module that exploits encoded knowledge about some sets or subsets of data to create information for a higher layer of applications (Widerhold, 1992). In Dao and Perry (1996), a mediator is an information-producing or serving entity in a large-scale internetworked environment.

A mediator is a special kind of information agent acting as middle man to take as input, a request to find an agent that provides a service, and returns as output, a list of such agents and their cooperation relationships. A mediator also stores the services offered by different agents in the existing environment, and when a new agent is introduced into the environment, it can register its capability to the me-

Figure 1: Mediator-Based Architecture



diator, using an agent service description language, if this agent wants its service to be used by others. Information agents also can unregister their services to the mediator when they want to quit the cooperation or exit. Also when an information agent receives a query or a subtask within a query that cannot be solved by itself, it can request the mediator to find out other agents that have the capability or a set of agents who can work cooperatively to provide that service.

AGENT SERVICES ONTOLOGY

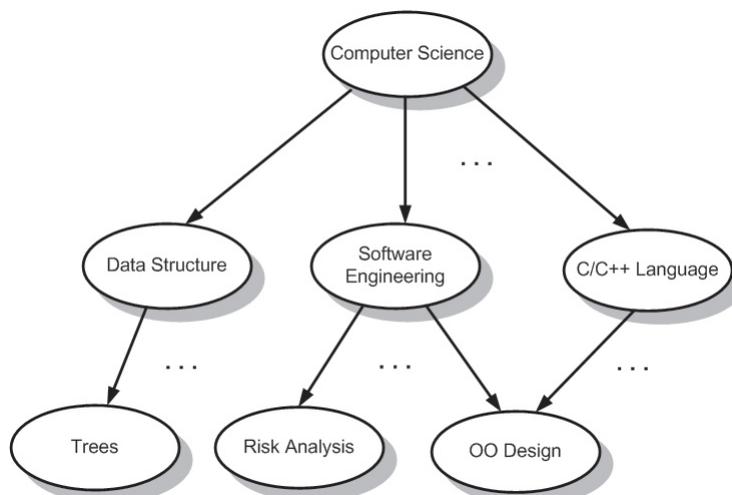
Since information agents are developed geographically dispersed over the Web, their capabilities are different from each other. SportsFinder (Lu, Sterling & Wyatt, 1999) can find the sports results of golf, cycling, football and basketball etc. for users, while Ahoy (Shakes, Langheinrich & Etzioni, 1997) is good at locating people's homepages. However, in an application domain, such as computer science subjects, there exists a hierarchical relationship among these information

agents. For example, information agent A can answer students' queries about Software Engineering, while agent B is only capable of consulting on Risk Analysis, which is a part of the subject of Software Engineering; in this case the service agent B can provide a subset of agent A.

Following are the relationships among services:

- **Identical Service:** This means the two services can provide the same function in spite of the fact that they may have different service names. As we know, information agents are being built over the Web using different programming languages and architecture. It is no surprise to have two agents running on different hosts that can offer the same service. Obviously, two identical services can substitute each other.
- **Subservice:** This relationship characterizes two services offered by agents, in which one service's function is only a part of another. For instance, an expert on C/C++ programming is good at tutoring a lab project on Object Oriented Design in a Software Engineering unit;

Figure 2: Fragment of Computer Science Subjects Ontology



but he/she may not be capable at formal methods in the same unit. In this point of view, the service offered by a tutor on C/C++ is only a part of a lecturer on the whole subject.

- **Substitute Service:** From the above description, we know that identical service and subservice are two special cases of substitute service relationship. But the difference is that identical services can substitute each other, while the subservice can only be alternated by its "parent" service, not vice versa.
- **Partial Substitute Service:** This relationship describes two services that have some common subservices. In some circumstances, partial substitute services can be alternated with each other, such as where the service agent is offering, just by chance, the common subservice with its partial substitute service, that is, the agent is not offering its full service to others at the moment.
- **Reciprocal Service:** If two services are reciprocal, that means they have no subservices in common, but they can work together to offer a "bigger" service. From this definition we know that in case there is no current agent available to provide the "bigger" service, these two reciprocal services can cooperate as a single agent for this task. This gives us a message that by combining the current agents in a different manner, we can tailor the system to meet new requirements.

Agent service ontology gives a formal method to describe the relationships among agent services. Agent service ontology contains all the services of information agents as well as their relationships. Basically, a directed cyclic graph (DCG) is able to present the relations between agent services. The nodes in the graph present the

services, and the edges are labelled with the service relationships. In Figure 2, a fragment of the ontology on computer science subjects is given, in the sense of the content of the topic and their relationships.

MEDIATING AGENT SERVICES ON THE WEB

Mediating is a process that utilizes the knowledge on service domain to introduce service providers and consumers. Mediating is a high-level services matching and brokerage, in terms of level of knowledge applied, and directions of information flow.

First of all, why do we need to mediate agent services on the Web? Let us look at the vast diversity of services that can be provided by agents all over the Web. Services are different in many aspects; I just name a few in the following:

- **Function:** It is obvious to note that different services have different functions. A sports agent has a totally different function to a shopping agent.
- **Constraints:** Even agents with the same function may impose different constraints on their input, output and input-output. For example, two lecturers both can be tutors on the subject, Data Structure and Algorithms, but one can only answer C questions, while the other is good at Java. They are able to consult on the same assignment question, but they require it in their capable language.
- **Quality and Privacy:** Quality and privacy are also varied from agent to agent, since they are run on different machines. Even when agents have the same function, due to the different implementations of the function, the qualities of their services may vary;

- Names: Agents may have different names despite the fact that they can provide the same service and have the same constraints and quality and privacy values.

The reasons that cause so many differences among agent services are mainly because of the open feature of the environment. Agents are developed over the Internet with heterogeneous architecture, and their functions vary from one to another.

Due to diversity of agents, the requests of services also vary. In most cases, we cannot expect that for a service request there is at least one agent to exactly provide that service, even through we suppose the service advertisement and request can fully express what the services are. In fact, a single agent cannot have a global view of the whole system; it is not practical to do that. Its request of service is also limited by the agent's "partial" knowledge of the environment.

MULTIPLE STRATEGIES FOR SERVICES MATCHING

Type Matching

This is the simplest strategy that only matches the types in the input and output fields of service advertisements against the correspondent field in requirements. It makes sure that a provider can take the inputs of requester, and its outputs are compatible with the requester's.

Constraint Matching

Constraint matching considers the constraint parts in agent service descriptions. Since all the constraints are given in constraint-language, the details of substitution depend on the constraint-language. For

the above two strategies, it is straightforward to design algorithms to check all the relevant variables and constraints.

Partial Matching

Partial match is a combination of type match and constraint match, but both lose a little bit. This strategy aims at services that are not completely matched, but have some functions in common. Partial matching means for two capability descriptions, if some of their input, output variables have subtype relations, and there are constraint clauses in their input and output constraint specifications that can be substituted, these two services are partial matched. Semantically, in some circumstances, i.e., the unmatched variables and constraints are irrelevant—the partial matched service is applicable.

Privacy Matching

Due to a service provider agent's privacy restriction, the matching result actually is sent to the service provider instead of the service requester. In other words, the provider agent wants to control the communication with consumers; it does not want to expose itself before knowing who is requesting its service.

Cooperative Matching

This strategy requires an arbitrary amount of deduction and knowledge to match any given service and request. It exploits service ontology, knowledge on the application domain, to discover the hidden relationships among currently available services. It returns the agents' contact information and their relationships. Briefly speaking, cooperative matching infers the available services to find a set

of available information agents that can cooperate in some way to provide the requested service.

TUTORFINDER: AN OPEN ON-LINE LEARNING TOOL

One great advantage of Web-based learning is its openness. Everyone on the Internet can participate the learning and education process at any time they like. Traditional computer-aided instruction (CAI) systems based on client-server architecture cannot cope with this requirement. In order to take the full advantages offered by the Web, a new trend of online learning is open systems architecture, which introduces middleware to solve the connection problem.

Based on the above mediator architecture and strategies, TutorFinder, an online tool for students and lecturers to locate suitable tutors, is presented in this section. TutorFinder is a mediator-based open system. Any new available agent, who is able to offer services related to a specific eLearning subject, can register or advertise its ability to the TutorMediator, shown in Figure 3, who acts as a middle man to mediate services requests and advertisements. This paradigm is open to any educators who wish to make their tools public over the Internet; in addition it is also open to any learners who are seeking some kind of help. Service requests and advertisements are written in the proposed agent services description language, which can be easily plugged into any agent communication language. TutorMediator applies the multiple matching strategies to find a team of service providers to inform a consumer. The matching process can be reversed as a marketing campaign, in case the service provider would like to

remain unknown until it knows who are seeking its services, and then the provider will target its marketing to the potential consumers. This procedure is depicted in Figure 1 as the dashed line labelled with "Marketing".

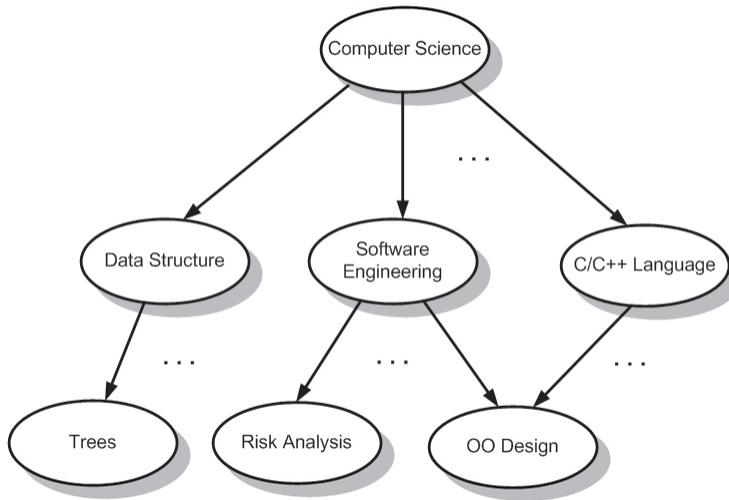
SERVICES DESCRIPTION AND MATCHING IN TUTORFINDER

The presented agent services description language based on ontology provides a meaningful tool for service providers to express their capabilities. This is critical in a Web-based learning environment, considering the open nature of eLearning. Using this language, online learning service providers can prescribe what kind of services they can offer to the community. For example, a Web service dedicated to answer students' queries on subject SCC303 Software Engineering can register its service to the above TutorMediator in the following format:

```
( service
  :service-id SCC303Tutor
  :constraint-language fopl
  :input ( (SCC303Question ?question) )
  :output ( (Answer ?answer) )
  :input-constraints (
    (elt ?question Question)
    (SubjectIn ?question SoftwareEngineering) )
  :io-constraints (
    (Correct ?question ?answer) )
  :service-ontology ComputerScience )
```

In this description, we know that the service SCC303Tutor takes questions in subject SCC303, Software Engineering, as input, and gives the correspondent answers. It requires an input to be a valid question defined in Computer Science

Figure 3: Tutor Mediator



Subjects ontology, and the question should be in the topics of Software Engineering; on these conditions, SCC303Tutor is able to give a correct answer. Please note that the constraints in this example are written in First Order Predicate Logic (FOPL), which is specified in constraint-language field. Actually, developers can choose any formal languages independent from ASDL to write constraints, and simply specify it in this field.

The ontology of Computer Science subjects is not only exploited in service advertising, in which it defines all the terms and their relationships used in the description, but also in service matching. Here I present a scenario in Figure 3.

In this scenario, there are four information agents available, and they can provide tutoring services on subjects of Software Engineering, Data Structure, C/C++ Language, and Risk Analysis to students. These four agents can be located at different universities and institutes. When a student or an agent requests services on Computer Science, TutorMediator can recommend a provider, or a list of service providers working as a team in case the

requested service cannot be accomplished by any single agents. Considering a student who is doing a programming project on Object Oriented Design and Analysis, at the current situation, no single agent has the capability on OO Design and Analysis programming; but this requested service can be achieved by two agents, Tom and Bob, who have the expertise on Software Engineering and C/C++ Language, respectively, working cooperatively as a team. So by exploiting service ontology and cooperative matching strategy, TutorMediator can reply to the student's query with Tom and Bob's contact information, as well as their relationship in forming the team. Without ontology and various matching strategies, this cannot be achieved. Powered with knowledge on the domain and a series of matching strategies, TutorMediator in our architecture is not a conventional middle agent, but an intelligent mediator who can reason and refer service providers' relationships, and guide them into cooperation.

CONCLUSION

The proposed agent service descrip-

tion language gives a flexible method for developers to plug in a suitable independent constraint language; it is more expressive for service quality and the privacy of service providers. The mediator, TutorMediator, in the presented open multi-agent architecture, serves as middle agent that not only solves the connection problem, but also infers the cooperation relationships among information agents; this will direct service providers to forge a cooperation to answer a user's query. In such a way, tutoring agents can improve their capabilities, and the online learning system becomes open and more scalable. This architecture with the service description language and matching strategies provides a solution to build an open online learning system step by step. It also enables developers to integrate new tutoring services with legacy eLearning systems, since the architecture and language are open. This is critical for the success of online education, because both the educator and learner can take the full advantage of the World Wide Web, which gives people the freedom to pursue education from anywhere at anytime.

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