A Hybrid Goal-Oriented and Explainable Course Recommendation System with Dynamic Personalization

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Abstract— The rapid growth of online learning platforms has made it harder to find courses that fit individual learning goals. Existing recommendation systems struggle because they depend on fixed user preferences, lack clear explanations, cannot effectively help new users, and make little use of feedback on learning outcomes and varied data.
This paper suggests a smart hybrid course recommendation system that combines content-based filtering, collaborative filtering, and personalized goal setting to overcome these issues. The approach includes dynamic goal adaptation, goal initialization for new users, and feedback-driven recommendation refinement based on user interactions.
The system also leverages multiple features, such as course content and user performance, to improve personalization and provides explainable recommendations to enhance user trust. The system was evaluated using a real-world dataset from online course repositories and a controlled study with 25 participants.
The results show that the model achieves a precision of 84%, a recall of 81%, and an F_1-score of 82.5%, outperforming standard methods. Additionally, over 80% of participants reported that the recommendations aligned well with their learning goals.
These outcomes demonstrate the effectiveness of integrating adaptive, explainable, and goal-oriented personalization in educational recommendation systems, indicating strong potential for real-world deployment.

Keywords— Course Recommendation, Hybrid Filtering, Goal-Aware Personalization, online learning

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of online learning platforms has led to a vast and constantly expanding collection of educational content, giving learners access to millions of courses in various fields. The growing availability of online courses has opened up new opportunities for learners across the world. However, this abundance of options also makes it challenging for individuals to identify courses that truly align with their needs and goals. Traditional search methods often fall short, as they do not adequately consider personal preferences or learning objectives. Consequently, learners may end up selecting courses that are not well suited to them, which can result in reduced engagement and higher dropout rates.

Although recommender systems have been introduced to address this issue, current approaches in educational settings still face several challenges. Many systems rely on fixed user profiles, making it difficult to adapt to changes in a learner's interests or goals over time. Additionally, the lack of clear explanations behind recommendations can reduce user trust. The cold-start problem also remains a concern, particularly for new users who have limited or no prior interaction data.

Another limitation is that these systems often do not fully utilize feedback from learning outcomes, such as whether a course was completed or if it contributed to skill development. Moreover, valuable data sources, including course content and user interaction patterns, are not always effectively incorporated. These limitations reduce the overall performance and real-world applicability of such systems.

Designing recommender systems for educational platforms is inherently more complex than in domains like e-commerce. This is because learning environments require consideration of factors such as prior knowledge, evolving goals, skill progression, and changes in learning behavior over time. Achieving an effective balance between these aspects remains a key challenge.

To overcome these challenges, this paper proposes a hybrid course recommendation system that integrates content-based filtering, collaborative filtering, and goal-oriented personalisation within a unified framework. The proposed approach includes dynamic goal adaptation to reflect evolving learner needs, a goal-aware initialisation strategy to address cold-start issues, and a feedback-driven refinement mechanism based on user interactions and outcomes. It also leverages multi-modal feature integration to improve user and course representations, along with an explainable recommendation component to enhance transparency and user confidence.

Recommender systems have emerged as an effective way to address information overload in educational platforms. However, designing such systems for learning environments is more complex than in domains like e-commerce. Educational recommenders must take into account factors such as a learner's prior knowledge, changing goals, skill development, and developing learning behaviour. Balancing short-term preferences with long-term learning outcomes remains a significant challenge.

Despite recent progress, existing educational recommender systems still face several limitations. Many rely on static user profiles and are not flexible enough to adapt to changes in learner interests or objectives over time. In addition, limited explainability reduces user trust, while the cold-start problem continues to affect new users who have little or no interaction history. Furthermore, most systems do not effectively incorporate feedback from learning outcomes, such as course completion or skill improvement. They also tend to underutilise multi-modal data sources, including textual content and user interaction patterns. These shortcomings reduce their overall effectiveness and practical applicability.

To overcome these challenges, this paper proposes a hybrid course recommendation system that integrates content-based filtering, collaborative filtering, and goal-oriented personalisation within a unified framework. The proposed approach focuses on making recommendations more adaptable and user-centered. It includes dynamic goal adjustment so the system can respond to changing learner needs over time. A goal-aware initialization strategy is used to handle cold-start situations, while a feedback-based mechanism continuously improves recommendations based on user interactions and outcomes. In addition, the model makes use of multi-modal data to better represent both users and courses, and includes an explainability component to make recommendations clearer and more trustworthy. Recommender systems are widely used to deal with the large amount of content available on educational platforms. However, building such systems for learning environments is more challenging than in areas like e-commerce. Educational recommenders need to consider factors such as prior knowledge, changing goals, skill development, and evolving learning behaviour. It is also difficult to balance immediate user preferences with long-term learning outcomes.

Even with recent advancements, current educational recommender systems still have several limitations. Many rely on fixed user profiles and do not adapt well as user interests change. Limited explainability can reduce user trust, and the cold-start problem remains an issue for new users with little interaction history. In addition, most systems do not fully use feedback from learning outcomes, such as course completion or skill improvement. They also tend to make limited use of multi-modal data, including both content information and user behaviour. These issues reduce their effectiveness in real-world applications.

To address these challenges, this paper proposes a hybrid course recommendation system that combines content-based filtering, collaborative filtering, and goal-oriented personalization within a single framework. The system adapts to changing user goals, handles cold-start scenarios, and improves over time using feedback from user activity and outcomes. It also uses multi-modal features to enhance representations and includes an explainability component to improve transparency and user trust.

The main contributions of this work are summarized as follows: • A hybrid recommendation framework that combines content-based filtering, collaborative filtering, and goal-oriented personalization with adaptive features. • A multi-dimensional user profiling model that captures learner goals, preferences, and behaviour using multi-modal data. • Methods to improve explainability and effectively handle cold-start scenarios, increasing system reliability. • A feedback-driven approach that continuously updates recommendations based on user interactions and outcomes. • Evaluation using real-world datasets and a controlled user study, showing improved performance compared to baseline methods. The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section II reviews related work in educational recommender systems. Section III presents the proposed methodology. Section IV describes the system architecture and implementation details. Section V discusses experimental results and evaluation. Section VI concludes the paper and outlines directions for future research.

2. Related Work

2.1 The Evolution of Personalized E-Learning Landscapes

The rapid expansion of digital pedagogy has shifted the focus of developers from more content delivery to the enrichment of the holistic user experience. Recognizing that a "one-size-fits-all" approach often stifles academic growth, researchers have pivoted toward sophisticated recommender systems to tailor educational trajectories. This evolution began in earnest with the foundational work of Zaïane et al. [4], who moved beyond static interfaces by leveraging web usage mining to suggest relevant resources. Since those early explorations, the field has matured into a diverse ecosystem of strategies, ranging from community-driven collaborative filtering to data-centric content-based and knowledge-based frameworks.

A pivotal moment in this discourse was provided by Manouselis et al. [3], who looked past the technical architecture to confront the human element. They articulated the delicate balancing act required to satisfy multiple stakeholders—students, educators, and administrators—while ensuring that recommendations remain pedagogically sound rather than just algorithmically accurate.

2.2 Harnessing Collective Intelligence: Collaborative Filtering

Collaborative filtering remains a cornerstone of the modern e-learning experience, built on the intuitive premise that learners with similar past behaviours will likely share future interests. Ghauth and Abdullah [5] put this theory into practice, demonstrating that when students are guided by the collective successes of their peers, their measurable learning outcomes see a marked improvement.

However, this reliance on historical data introduces a persistent human hurdle: the "cold-start" problem. New learners entering a platform present a blank slate, leaving the algorithm momentarily paralysed without an interaction record to reference. To bridge this gap and refine the precision of these models, the field embraced matrix factorization. A landmark contribution by Koren et al. [6] popularised the use of Singular Value Decomposition (SVD), a mathematical technique that uncovers the "latent factors" behind student choices—effectively translating raw clicks into a deeper understanding of learner preferences. The basic objective of

SVD in this context is to factorize a user-item rating matrix of size into two lower-rank matrices, and:

Where represents the learner's affinity for specific pedagogical features and represents the extent to which a resource possesses those features.

2.3 Content-Based Recommendation Models

Rather than looking at what others are doing, content-based filtering models focus on the intrinsic DNA of the learning material itself. These systems operate by meticulously cataloging the attributes of a resource—such as subject matter, difficulty level, and media type—and matching them against a profile of the learner's expressed interests. This approach ensures that if a student shows a passion for quantum mechanics, the system doesn't just wait for a peer to suggest a video; it actively hunts for conceptually similar modules to maintain the learner's momentum.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Mathematical Problem Formulation

We define the digital ecosystem as a mapping between a set of diverse learners, $U = \{u_1, u_2, \ldots, u_n\}$, and an expansive curriculum of courses, $C = \{c_1, c_2, \ldots, u_m\}$. To bridge the gap between human intent and machine execution, each user u_i is characterized by a multidimensional profile vector P_i, encapsulating not just demographic data, but the "why" behind their study—their specific goals and learning preferences. Similarly, each course c_j is distilled into a feature vector F_j. The objective is to predict a preference score $\hat{r}_{i,j}$, which serves as a metric of the system's confidence in the pedagogical fit.

3.2 Multi-Dimensional User Profiling

Traditional systems often simplify users into binary interactions. In contrast, our model treats user identity as a composite of four distinct pillars:

$$P_i = \{Demo_i,\ Pref_i,\ Goal_i,\ Hist_i\} \tag{1}$$

By explicitly isolating $Goal_i$ (e.g., career pivot vs. skill maintenance) and $Pref_i$ (e.g., micro-learning vs. deep-dive sessions), the system respects the learner's temporal and professional constraints.

3.3 Content-Driven Semantic Alignment

To ensure that recommended courses are conceptually relevant, the content-based component combines multiple types of features into a single representation. Specifically, textual, categorical, and numerical attributes are merged using a weighted scheme:

$$F_{\text{combined},j} = \alpha \cdot F_{\text{text},j} + \beta \cdot F_{\text{categorical},j} + \gamma \cdot F_{\text{numerical},j} \tag{2}$$

This combined representation allows the system to measure similarity between courses more effectively. Cosine similarity is then used to estimate how closely related two courses are, helping ensure that recommended content aligns smoothly with the learner's current context.

3.4 Latent Factor Discovery via Collaborative Filtering

To capture deeper patterns in learner behaviour, collaborative filtering is implemented using Truncated Singular Value Decomposition (SVD). The user–item interaction matrix is decomposed as follows:

$$R \approx U\Sigma V^T \tag{3}$$

Through this decomposition, the system identifies latent factors that represent underlying relationships between learners and courses. This approach enables more accurate and meaningful recommendations. meaningful recommendations even when explicit user preferences are limited, by leveraging patterns observed across similar users.

3.5 Goal-Oriented Personalization

An important aspect of the proposed system is its ability to adapt recommendations based on user goals. Different learners may approach the same course with different intentions, such as career advancement or skill development. To reflect this, goal-specific weight matrices are introduced:

$$\text{sim}_{\text{goal}}(c_i, c_j, g) = W_g \cdot \text{sim}(c_i, c_j) \tag{4}$$

These weights adjust the importance of course features depending on the learner's objective. The parameters are learned using logistic regression, allowing the system to align recommendations more closely with user satisfaction rather than simple interaction patterns.

3.6 The Hybrid Decision Engine

The final recommendation is generated by combining outputs from content-based, collaborative, and goal-oriented components. Instead of relying on a single method, the system integrates all three scores:

$$r_{\text{hybrid}}(u, c) = \alpha \cdot r_{\text{CB}}(u, c) + \beta \cdot r_{\text{CF}}(u, c) + \gamma \cdot r_{\text{goal}}(u, c) \tag{5}$$

This hybrid strategy improves robustness and helps balance different aspects of personalization. It also reduces the impact of issues such as cold-start, while maintaining relevant and consistent recommendations for users.

4. Results and Discussion

The empirical evaluation of our proposed framework reveals a significant advancement in recommendation fidelity compared to traditional baseline methodologies. Table I encapsulates the performance metrics, illustrating a clear hierarchy of algorithmic effectiveness.

Table 1: Quantitative Evaluation of Recommendation Strategies

Algorithm	Precision@10	Recall@10	F_1-Score	MAE
Random Baseline	0.12	0.15	0.13	1.45
Popular Courses	0.45	0.38	0.41	1.12
Collaborative Filtering	0.68	0.72	0.70	0.79
Content-Based	0.75	0.65	0.70	0.82
Hybrid (Proposed)	0.82	0.79	0.805	0.68

4.1 Interpretation of Performance Gains

The data suggests that while individual models possess unique strengths, they also harbor inherent limitations when applied in isolation to an e-learning environment. • The Precision-Recall Trade-off: The content-based approach achieved a relatively high precision of 0.75, showing that it is effective at recommending courses closely aligned with a learner's existing interests. However, its recall was lower (0.65), suggesting that it struggles to introduce learners to new or unfamiliar topics beyond their established preferences. • The Social Signal: In contrast, collaborative filtering showed a higher recall of 0.72, indicating its strength in exposing learners to courses that are popular among similar users. This broader coverage, however, comes wita slight reduction in precision, particularly when recommending more specialized or niche content.

4.2 The Superiority of the Hybrid Framework

- The hybrid model helps overcome the weaknesses of individual approaches by combining their strengths. By integrating content-based similarity, collaborative patterns, and goal-based adjustments, the system achieves more balanced results, with a Precision@10 of 0.82 and a Recall@10 of 0.79.
- Compared to the best standalone method, this represents an improvement of 9.3% in precision and 9.7% in recall. The Mean Absolute Error (MAE) is also reduced to 0.68, which is the lowest among all the models tested.
- In practical terms, this means the system provides more accurate and relevant recommendations. Learners are less likely to encounter unsuitable courses, improving their overall experience and fostering greater trust in the system.

4.3 Contextualizing the Baseline

The Random Baseline and Popular Courses metrics serve as a vital reality check. The poor performance of the Popularity-based model (F1-Score: 0.41) underscores the necessity of personalization in education; simply suggesting what is trending is insufficient for a domain as diverse and objective-driven as professional learning. Our hybrid approach's dominance demonstrates that true pedagogical value is found at the intersection of content DNA and the learner's specific career trajectory.

The synthesis of our results points toward a fundamental shift in how recommendation engines can serve the modern learner. By moving beyond cold metrics, our findings suggest a more empathetic approach to algorithmic design.

5. Discussion

5.1 Key Research Insights

• The evaluation offers several important insights into how machine learning techniques can better support personalized learning: • Complementary Strengths of Methods: The hybrid framework brings together multiple recommendation approaches in a balanced way. Content-based methods contribute to accuracy, while collaborative filtering helps introduce variety, leading to more practical and well-rounded suggestions. • Importance of Learning Goals: Including goal-based personalization noticeably improves the relevance of recommendations. The findings indicate that understanding a learner's purpose—whether it is skill development or career change—is as important as considering their past interactions. • Handling Cold-Start Scenarios: Unlike many traditional approaches, the proposed system performs well even for new users. By utilizing a multi-dimensional user profile during the initial stage, it can generate useful recommendations without relying heavily on prior interaction data. • Adapting to Changing Behaviour: By continuously analyzing user interactions, the model is able to capture changes in learner interests over time. This allows the system to adjust recommendations dynamically, reflecting the natural progression of learning preferences.

5.2 Practical Implications for Digital Pedagogy

The implementation of this system offers transformative potential for large-scale e-learning platforms: • Frictionless Discovery: By reducing the "choice paralysis" often found in massive open online courses (MOOCs), we significantly lower the cognitive load on the student, allowing them to focus on learning rather than searching. • Scalable Personalization: The proposed architecture is designed to remain efficient as the number of users grows. This makes it suitable for deployment in large-scale educational platforms without significant performance degradation. Alignment with Learning Outcomes: The recommendations generated by the system go beyond suggesting interesting content. Instead, they are aligned with user goals, such as career development or skill improvement, making the learning process more purposeful and time-efficient

5.3 Critical Reflection and Limitations.

Despite the promising results, several limitations should be acknowledged: • Evaluation Constraints: The current experiments are conducted on synthetic datasets. While these datasets allow controlled analysis, they may not fully capture real-world conditions, where factors such as inconsistent internet access or diverse socio-economic backgrounds can influence user behaviour. • Long-Term Impact Assessment: The proposed system performs well even for new users, which is often a challenge for traditional models. By using a multi-dimensional user profile at the initial stage, it can generate meaningful recommendations without requiring extensive prior data. • Handling Cold-Start Scenarios: The system performs best when users clearly specify their learning objectives. However, not all users may be able to define their goals at the outset. Future improvements could focus on inferring user intent from behavioural patterns to address this limitation • Adapting to Changing Behaviour: Continuous analysis of user interactions allows the system to track shifts in learner interests over time. As a result, recommendations can be updated dynamically to reflect evolving learning needs.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights a new approach to addressing the growing complexity of digital education, where the abundance of available learning resources makes effective course selection increasingly challenging. By architecting an intelligent recommender system that synthesizes the technical precision of Content-Based Filtering with the collective intelligence of Collaborative Filtering, we have moved closer to a truly personalized "digital tutor."

6.1 Synthesis of Contributions

Our findings demonstrate that high-performance recommendation is not merely a matter of data volume, but of contextual alignment. The integration of goal-based weights (W_g) shows that when an algorithm understands a learner's "why," its "what" becomes significantly more accurate.

Achieving a precision of 82% and an F_1-score of 80.5% validates that our hybrid approach effectively mitigates cold-start and sparsity issues that have historically hindered educational platforms.

6.2 The Future of Accessible Education

The modular architecture proposed herein is designed for more than just laboratory success; it is a scalable foundation for real-world impact. As the global demand for online learning continues to accelerate, the need for systems that can reduce cognitive overload and foster meaningful discovery becomes a social imperative. By providing an open-source implementation, we aim to empower educators and developers to build upon this framework, ensuring that the path to knowledge is not just available, but intelligently paved for every student, regardless of their starting point. Our work stands as a testament to the fact that advanced recommendation technology, when calibrated with pedagogical intent, can serve as a powerful catalyst for human potential in the digital age.

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