Programming in Matlab/Octave or Python

I will give code snippets in Matlab and Python during the course. All Matlab examples will also work in the largely-compatible free package Octave. You are expected to become familiar with one of Matlab/Octave or Python, and use it to check your understanding through the course, and for the assessed assignment. Sometimes I will only give demonstrations with Matlab/Octave. If you wish to use Python, you will need to work out more by yourself (although I’m happy to answer questions if you’re genuinely stuck).

Why Matlab/Octave: If you don’t have much programming experience, you are likely to have fewer problems getting started with Matlab or Octave. The language is simpler than the combination of Python and its scientific libraries, and the base install of Matlab or Octave will do everything you need for this course. I usually prefer giving Matlab/Octave examples, as they tend to be quicker to set up, and make fewer assumptions about your installation. Although Python+NumPy is neater for some types of calculation.

Why Python: Python is good for writing larger programs, and accessing large machine learning frameworks like TensorFlow, Theano, or Keras. If you know Python well, or have lots of programming experience, you will probably want to work with Python. Personally I’m using it more and more in my research. However, you’ll probably have to do more work to get set up, and you’ll have to learn to routinely import some modules as outlined below.

Other languages? Languages like R or Lua (with Torch), are also sensible choices for machine learning. I’m not personally used to the quirks in the R language, however it has a large collection of well-documented statistical packages in CRAN, and is a good choice if you primarily want to use existing statistical toolboxes. If you want to write compiled code, you might look at using the C++ library Eigen. If you learn the principles of array-based computation for machine learning with Matlab or Python, you should be able to rapidly generalize to whatever tool you need to use in the future.

Getting started with Matlab/Octave

Matlab and Octave are both installed for your use on the Informatics DICE computer system. You could purchase a Matlab student license to use Matlab on your own machine. However, I recommend first trying the free software Octave, which will do everything you need for this course.

You should work through a tutorial that covers creating vectors and matrices, evaluating expressions containing matrices and vectors, basic plotting (line graphs, histograms), and basic programming constructs (for loops, and functions). Suitable tutorials include:

- Cambridge Engineering Octave tutorial
- The Mathwork’s own Matlab tutorial

Optional extra, for keen students:

- Outline notes on writing fast Matlab code

Getting started with Python

Python and its associated scientific libraries are installed on the Informatics DICE system. However, these packages change quickly, and DICE is likely to have older versions than you would install on your own machine.

If installing on your own machine, I recommend trying the Anaconda distribution, unless the package manager you normally use to install software has well-maintained Python packages. Some software distributions come with fairly old Python packages, whereas Anaconda usually “just works”. Whatever route you take, you’ll want at least Python, NumPy, SciPy,
and matplotlib. Either Python 2 or Python 3 is ok, although I now lean towards Python 3 (more below).

If you don’t already know the basics of Python, you should probably just start out with Octave instead. Otherwise you’d first have to find a Python tutorial at your level, and work through it. The official Python tutorial is a good start. (You don’t need the more advanced topics, like classes, or to work through all the standard library examples.) Then you would need to learn the NumPy and matplotlib libraries. Again, there are many tutorials online. You might start with the official quickstart guide. For more, you could work through some of http://www.scipy-lectures.org/, which aims to be “One document to learn numerics, science, and data with Python”.

I use Python interactively from the ipython command-line program. From there you can type %paste to run code in the clipboard, or use the %run command to run code stored in a file. If you get an error, you can use %debug to enter a debugger. If you start ipython with python --pylab then plotting works smoothly: there’s no need for show() commands, and plot windows don’t cause the interpreter to hang. The pylab environment also imports commonly-used functions like plot() into the top level, so you can use it more like Matlab.

Those that like a graphical environment could try Spyder.

Ipython or Jupyter notebooks are becoming popular, and are used in the MLP course. I’ve chosen not to create notebooks for this course because these tools are still changing quickly. Getting everyone running the right version could take a lot of time, and I don’t want to rely on a central server, which you wouldn’t be able to access after the course is over. However, if you like the notebook interface, feel free to use it yourself.

Commonly-used Python modules

If you use Python you will use NumPy extensively. The standard way to use this module is

```python
import numpy as np
```

Then some example code would be:

```python
A = np.random.randn(3, 3)
matrix_product = np.dot(A, A) # simply "A @ A" with python >=3.5
```

I might not always specify the import line in my Python examples, but you’ll need it if my code refers to np.something. Similarly if I refer to plt, a Matlab-like plotting interface, you’ll need to import it as follows:

```python
import matplotlib.pyplot as plt
```

Some people reduce the amount of typing they need to do with:

```python
from numpy import *
from matplotlib.pyplot import *
```

which means code can directly call functions like dot() and plot() without the “np.” prefix. Ready access to the functions is convenient for interactive use, but importing a large set of functions is usually considered poor practice in “real code”. For example Python’s sum() and max() and NumPy’s np.sum() and np.max() could become confused with each other, which can lead to subtle bugs.

Python 2 vs Python 3

Python 2 support is due to end in 2020, so most people will need to migrate to Python 3 sooner or later. Despite that, Python 2 is still the most widely available version, so I’ve tried to make all my code examples work in both Python 2 and Python 3. I now suggest using Python 3 if you have a choice.

The main change in Python 3 is Unicode string handling, which isn’t relevant for the sort of code we’ll write in this course. The minor issue you’ll have to deal with in practice is avoiding Python 2 print statements:
print "Hello World!"  # Python 2 code that will crash in Python 3
Add parenthesis around the string as follows:
    print("Hello World!")  # Works in both Python 2 and Python 3
Replace any more complicated Python 2 print statements with Python 3 style print functions. Then you will need a magic import line at the top of your code to make them work in Python 2 as well. For example:
    from __future__ import print_function
    print('thing1', 'thing2', sep=' ', )
Python 3.5 comes with a matrix multiply operator, so you can write \( A \odot B \) instead of \( \text{np.dot}(A, B) \). I’ll try to remember to still use \text{np.dot}, so my examples will work in earlier versions of Python.