Active and Passive Learning in Agent-based Financial Markets

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Abstract

This short note compares and contrasts two forms of learning which are present in most agent-based financial markets. First, passive learning refers to a form of "as if rationality" where wealth accumulates on strategies which have done relatively well. Second, active learning refers to the active switching of agents across strategies. Most heterogeneous agent markets contain some form of both these types of learning. From what we know so far the dynamics of each may be quite different, and may yield a rich and complex joint dynamic.

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1 Introduction

The construction of agent-based financial markets is now a field with nearly 20 years of experience to learn from. There are many basic principles of methodology and design that have been learned over the years. This short note will briefly comment on one aspect of markets and learning that is often ignored, the interaction between active and passive learning dynamics. I will define and argue that both these forms of learning are important to financial market dynamics. Both of these have been used by many authors, but rarely have the interactions between the two been explored. Further, few authors explore the relative strengths and weaknesses of using these forms of learning in a financial setting. In this way, this note serves as a quick reminder about what we are doing, and as a suggestion for important future research into how heterogeneous agent financial markets function.

It will be important to first define active and passive learning in a agent-based market. Passive learning refers to the accumulation of wealth in strategies which have been successful. Good strategies thrive and become a larger part of the market, while weak strategies eventually die off. This is a version of "as if rationality" described originally in Friedman (1953). It is often used as a metaphor for convergence to some form of market efficiency, or at least a selection mechanism which would weed out ineffective strategies. The basic premise of who might survive in the long run out of a sea of different strategies is an old one in finance. It is tied to the original betting rules of Kelley (1956), and growth optimal portfolios which were debated in the the 1960's and 1970's in papers such as Samuelson (1971) and Hakansson (1971). A recent and up to date survey on this area is contained in Evstigneev, Hens & Schenk-Hoppe (2009).[1] In the next section I will describe some of the modeling features, strengths, and weaknesses of passive learning.

The other form of learning, active learning, may be closer in spirit to what people are thinking about when they imagine learning in a financial or economic setting. Agents actively chose strategies, with some well defined objective function in mind. This form of learning is part of almost all of the heterogeneous agent markets which consider dynamic strategy adjustment of any kind. Agents may be switching over fixed strategies, or over a set of evolving strategies as in markets built with genetic algorithms.[2] In all cases, there is a active attempt by agents to move their wealth into strategies that have performed well in the recent or

[1] Another early theoretical derivation is in Breiman (1961). A nice summary of this is in Markowitz (1976). Blume & Easley (1990) and Blume & Easley (2006) state the problem in the context of a utility maximizing portfolio decision. The latter paper paper proves that in a complete market world the convergence to true beliefs will occur regardless of preference parameters. However, the authors point out that in an incomplete market world this convergence is not guaranteed. Evstigneev, Hens & Schenk-Hoppe (2006) look at an incomplete markets world with endogenous prices. In their framework the growth optimal strategy will dominate any other competing strategy in terms of acquiring all wealth in the long run.

[2] The literature on this form of active learning in financial markets is extensive. Several recent surveys are Chiarella, Dieci & He (2009), Hommes (2006), and LeBaron (2006).

distant past.

The next section will make these ideas clearer in a simple market framework. It will also go through some of what we know about these systems, and some conjectures about what we may find out in the future.

2 A simple model framework

First, I will describe a simple market framework, from which the principles of passive and active learning will be made clear. This is far from a fully developed market, and only represents a skeleton for a market representation. In the most basic of markets I will assume a world with a risky asset that pays a dividend at time t, D_t. The dividend will follow some arbitrary stochastic process.[3] Individual agents (indexed by i) are assumed to purchase shares in this risky asset, $S_{t,i}$. They also hold, $B_{t,i}$ units of a risk free asset which pays an interest rate r_f. The intertemporal budget constraint for agent i is given by

$$W_{t,i} = P_t S_{t,i} + B_{t,i} = (P_t + D_t)S_{t-1,i} + B_{t-1,i}(1 + r_f) - C_{t,i} \tag{1}$$

$W_{t,i}$ represents the wealth of agent i at time t, and $C_{t,i}$ is consumption at time t. If consumption is assumed to be some fraction of wealth determined by, $\lambda(I_t)$, a function of information at time t, the above budget becomes

$$W_{t,i} = P_t S_{t,i} + B_{t,i} = (1 - \lambda(I_t))((P_t + D_t)S_{t-1,i} + B_{t-1,i}(1 + r_f)). \tag{2}$$

Two further assumptions can be useful in modeling. First, simplifying the consumption decision to a constant fraction of wealth would give,

$$W_{t,i} = P_t S_{t,i} + B_{t,i} = (1 - \lambda)((P_t + D_t)S_{t-1,i} + B_{t-1,i}(1 + r_f)). \tag{3}$$

A second, and less used, assumption, is to set $r_f = 0$. This can be done to restrict the incoming resources to the economy to the dividend stream alone which makes the model a simple general equilibrium economy with costless storage in the consumption good.

Learning in this world takes place in the portfolio choice of individual agents. Assume that $\alpha_j(I_t)$ is a investment strategy (indexed by j) that yields the fraction of wealth to put into the risky asset. In general, an agent could spread a fraction of wealth over different strategies. Let $\omega_{i,j}$ be the fraction of wealth of

[3] Often this can be calibrated to some actual macro series.

agent i in strategy j. In most agent-based models this value is either zero or one as agents concentrate their wealth in only one strategy. Both of these are functions of information at time t, I_t. Share demand for an agent i using strategy j is given by

$$S_{t,i} = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{J} \omega_{i,j}(I_t)\alpha_j(I_t)(1-\lambda)W_{t,i}}{P_t}. \tag{4}$$

This share demand, and strategy is important in exploring active and passive learning. The key feature is that the demand for shares is proportional to wealth. This would be the outcome of most constant relative risk aversion preferences (not constant absolute risk aversion). The economy is closed by setting the total supply of shares to 1,

$$1 = \sum_{i=1}^{I} S_{t,i}. \tag{5}$$

It is important to note that pricing in this market depends not on the number of traders using a given strategy j, but on the wealth in strategy j which would be written as

$$Z_{t,j} = \sum_{i=1}^{I} \omega_{i,j}(I_t)W_{t,i}. \tag{6}$$

This now forms the skeleton for a simple agent-based economy with a working financial market. Details of agent learning and behavior go into building sets of strategies, $\alpha_j(I_t)$, and methods for agents choosing strategies over time. A model of this form would have both active and passive learning, and I will use its structure to clearly define the concepts.

This market could represent pure passive learning with no active learning. This case would correspond to $\omega_{i,j}$ being constant, and agents do not switch strategies. Their strategies may be dynamic, in that $\alpha_j(I_t)$ is allowed to depend on current and past information in complex fashions, but the agents all stay with their given strategies no matter how poorly they are doing. For model design this is a powerful learning concept. As long as there is at least some persistence in the agents' decisions, $\omega_{i,j}$, there will be some form of passive learning, or wealth adjustment to successful strategies in the market.[4] So a strength of this form of learning, is that it is easy to model, and probably somewhat ubiquitous in all real and artificial markets.

Unfortunately, it comes with several drawbacks that are important to think about. First, passive learning

[4] There is one important class of models where passive learning is inactive. Models with CARA utility and adaptive rule selection generally have no passive learning component. Two very different examples of this are Brock & Hommes (1998) and Arthur, Holland, LeBaron, Palmer & Tayler (1997). Price formation depends on the fraction of traders in a given strategy, and not on their wealth. Later version of markets I developed such as LeBaron (2001) were changed to CRRA risk aversion so that some form of passive learning would be active. Another case where passive learning may not be relevant is in the large literature on financial experiments.

is not equivalent to utility maximization. Wealth does not select utility maximizing strategies except in particular cases.[5] Many authors have made this point, but one of the sharpest examples is Blume & Easley (2006). The key result there is that with incomplete markets, and preferences that deviate from log, wealth will move to strategies with beliefs that deviate from true probabilities. I have implemented a very simple, stylized example in LeBaron (2007). This paper considers an exogenous, and predictable returns process which follows a simple state space model. The optimal forecast is given by a Kalman filter. The experiments evolve risk averse (CRRA) traders with different parameters in their Kalman forecasts. As long as preferences deviate from log, wealth selects forecasts with gain parameters deviating from the optimal forecast. If one were to look the the behavior of surviving agents in this world relative to their observed time series, they would be deemed irrational. Effectively, the biased parameters generate agents who behave closer to log utility.[6] The key point here is that wealth evolution alone selects for something other than rationality, and therefore it should not be confused with rationality.[7]

A second, but much less explored, feature of passive learning, is that it may be very slow. Few models try to assess the speed of adjustment, since this would depend on calibrating models to real data, and real strategies. However, Berrada (2009), LeBaron (2007), and Yan (2008) all suggest caution on the ability of of this form of learning to be relevant in real data due to its very slow speed. They show that in reasonable financial models convergence may be measured in units of decades, so that extreme patience may be required for this form of learning to be relevant. This is an important question for learning researchers to be concerned with, and should be further explored.

Allowing agents to begin adjusting their strategy choices $\omega_{i,j}(I_t)$ changes this to a model incorporating active learning. Active learning is intuitively appealing. It seems like something agents are doing in the real world as they adapt behavior to new information.[8] However, unlike passive learning, modeling this type of learning is challenging, and there are no clear paths for the agent-based model builder here.[9] The model builder needs to decide on many aspects of how agents select optimal rules. First, what sort of objective function should be used? Should it be profits, or some estimate of expected utility? Second, how much past data (memory) should this estimator work with when building these estimates. Finally, what fraction of agents should be considering changing rules each period? Should it be a small fraction, or all agents? Should

[5]The best known case would be log utility.

[6]General dominance results for log utility are contained in Evstigneev et al. (2006).

[7]This point has been made by a large number of papers. For a result directly tied to Friedman's examples of firms and profit maximization see Radner (1998), and also Winter (1982). For very recent studies which incorporate this form of evolution see Brennan & Lo (2009) and Cherkashin, Farmer & Lloyd (2009).

[8]The evidence in support of various forms of active learning extends beyond casual introspection. Laboratory evidence shows some support for various forms of active learning. Some of this work in financial markets is surveyed in Hommes (2010).

[9]This is where Sims (1980)'s critique of deviations from rationality is in full force.

the decision to update depend on current market activity? These are only a few of the many open design questions that have to be answered to model active learning.

In the literature on active learning, some frameworks have proved useful and relatively easily applied in many different cases. A good example of this is the simple discrete choice model originally popularized by Brock & Hommes (1997). It is straight forward, yields strong analytic results, and has good micro foundations. However, even in this framework several of these design questions are still open, such as memory, and the fraction of the population updating. Furthermore, the dynamics depends on a crucial parameter, the intensity of choice, that needs to be pinned down.[10]

A second, but less considered, issue for adaptive learning, is whether its dynamics are driven more by noise, than actual fitness of various forecasting rules. Given that financial data is very noisy, and attempts to evaluate relative forecasts are often not very conclusive, it is very likely that in an agent-based market generating realistic data, the adaptive learning process may be adapting to noise. Movements in strategy space may be more due to genetic drift, than actual fitness differences. While this is something researchers should be aware of, it may not be a big problem, since this noisy rule adjustment may be quite realistic.[11]

3 Conclusions

Realistic heterogeneous agent models of financial markets need to take into account both passive and active learning. Researchers should be aware that they are often using both of these in various modeling frameworks. Each comes with its own set of issues. Passive learning is easy to model, but does not necessarily select for utility maximization, and it may be slow. On the other hand, active learning can move at reasonable speeds, and seems to be an important part of observed behavior. Unfortunately, it is difficult to model, and involves many degrees of freedom. Also, it may often be adapting to noise in financial time series.

In real markets we probably see some combination of these two forms of learning. They may take place at vary different speeds or time scales, and might generate interesting dynamics as they interact with eachother. Eventually, understanding the impact of both these forms of learning will be important to understanding the dynamics in real financial markets.

[10] Important current work has moved in the direction of estimating the intensity of choice as in Goldbaum & Mizrach (2008) or Boswijk, Hommes & Manzan (2007).

[11] It reminds one of Fisher Black's discussions in Black (1986).

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