# Diffusion-Based Sampling for Deep Active Learning

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***Abstract*—The remarkable performance of deep neural networks depends on the availability of massive labeled training data. To alleviate the load of data labelling, deep active learning aims to sample a minimal set of training points to be labelled which yields maximal model accuracy. We propose an efficient sampling criterion to sample data for annotation, which automatically shifts from an exploration type of sampling to a class-decision-boundary refinement. Our criterion relies on a process of diffusing the existing label information over a graph constructed from the hidden representation of the data. This graph representation captures the intrinsic geometry of the approximated labeling function. We analyze our sampling criterion and its exploration - refinement transition in light of the eigen-spectrum of the diffusion operator. Additionally, we provide a comprehensive sample complexity analysis that captures the two phases of exploration and refinement. The diffusion-based sampling criterion is shown to be advantageous over state-of-the-art criteria for deep active learning on synthetic and real benchmark data.**

## I. Introduction

Deep learning has provided unprecedented performance in various semi-supervised learning tasks ranging from speech recognition to computer vision and natural language processing. Deep Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN), in particular, have demonstrated object recognition that exceeds human's performance. However, this success comes with the requirement for massive amounts of labelled data. While data collection at large scale has become easier, its annotation with labels has become a bottleneck for execution in many real-life problems.

Active learning provides a plethora of techniques that allow to sample a set of data points for labeling, which optimally minimizes the error probability under a fixed budget of a labeling effort (see [22] for review). A well known trade-off in active learning is between the exploration and refinement sampling strategies. Exploration aims at mapping the joint data and label distribution in order to identify decision boundaries, and typically yields higher model accuracy at the earlier stage of active learning over other baselines criteria. Refinement (also referred to as exploitation), on the other hand, samples labels at the proximity of a discovered class decision-boundary, improving its localization. Active learning exhibits improved performance when the balance between exploration and refinement is optimal.

Incorporating active learning into deep learning remains a challenging task for several reasons. First, the network representation does not facilitate the construction of a simplistic probabilistic sampling criterion that incorporates exploration and refinement. Thus, state-of-the-art approaches focus on either exploration or on a refinement type criteria, which often leads to sub-optimal results. This state drives active deep learning methodology to focus mostly on simple refinement-type uncertainty sampling criteria (e.g. [8, 23]), which do not require using auxiliary algorithms for sample selection at the querying stage. Or, on using geometric criteria (e.g. [21]) that only explores the data distribution in its feature space.

We propose a graph Diffusion-based Deep Active Learning (DDAL) criterion. We utilize the graph diffusion process, learnt on a graph constructed from the penultimate layer, to derive our active sampling criterion. The penultimate representation becomes correlated with the labeling function as the training progresses, and hence provides an optimal representation to sample the labeling function. The main contributions of DDAL are:

1) **Exploration-refinement trade-off**: We derive a sampling criterion which exhibits an automatic switch from exploration to refinement-based sampling. Our criterion explores graph nodes that are unreachable via diffusion, and then refines the boundary where diffused labels are ambivalent. This natural switch avoids the need in active learning for an additional optimization machinery (e.g. [25]) to decide which criterion type to use. We analyze the exploration-refinement switch in light of the eigen-spectrum of the diffusion iterant. We provide a sketch of the application of our method in Fig 1.
2) **Sample complexity analysis**: We provide sample complexity analysis for the two phases of exploration and refinement. The analysis depicts complexity that is logarithmic in $N$, and linear in the decision boundary set.
3) **Empirical validation:** The competitive performance of DDAL is demonstrated empirically on benchmark data and compared with eight state-of-the-art active learning criteria. In particular, those constructed for deep learning.

## II. Problem Setup

Let $\mathcal{D}$ be a probability distribution over $\mathbb{R}^d \times [C]$, where $[C] = \{1, ..., C\}$ and $C \geq 2$ indicates the number of classes. Our aim is to find a classifier $f : \mathbb{R}^d \to \Delta_C$ ($\Delta_C$ denotes the space of probability measures over $[C]$) that minimizes the classification error probability

$$\mathcal{E}(f) = \mathbb{P}_{(x,y)\sim\mathcal{D}}\left\{ (\arg\max_{c\in[C]} f_c(x)) \neq y \right\}.$$

In deep learning, we consider the parametric functions

$$f_\theta = g_{\theta_{n+1}} \circ h^n_{\theta_n} \circ \cdots \circ h^1_{\theta_1},$$

where $h^i_{\theta_i} : \mathbb{R}^{d_{i-1}} \to \mathbb{R}^{d_i}$ (with $d_0 = d$) and $g_{\theta_{n+1}} : \mathbb{R}^{d_n} \to \Delta_C$. The parameter $\theta = \{\theta_i\}_i$ defines our final model $f_\theta$.

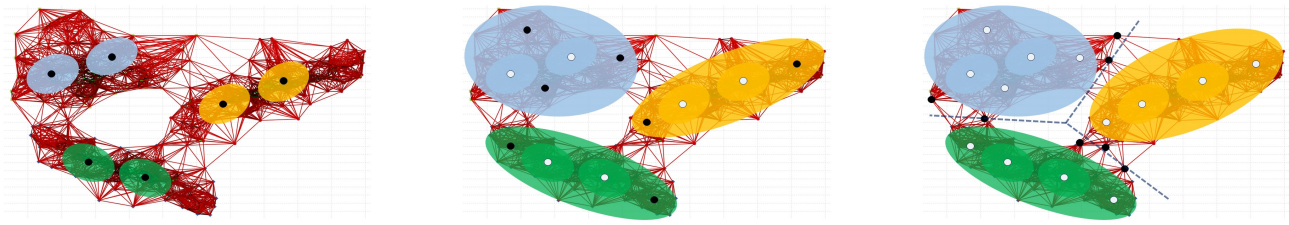


Figure 1: **Schematic evolution of diffusion-based active sampling on the graph $G(V, E, W)$ constructed on the penultimate layer**. The graph in red represents the constructed graph over all points $X_\ell \cup X_{\text{pool}}$ Black points - current samples, white points - previous samples, ovals - area of low uncertainty in class label for 3 different color coded labels. Left: active sampling in early exploration stage. Center: advanced exploration stage of sampling captures the label related clusters. Right: Refinement (exploitation) stage: black samples focus on the decision boundary between class where highest uncertainty prevails.

**Active learning setting.** In active learning, one is given a *pool* of input data points $X_{\text{pool}} = \{x_i\}_{i=1}^N$, and a budget $Q$ to select for labeling. Optionally, a labelled subset $X_\ell \subset X_{\text{pool}}$ may also be given as input. In the following, we denote $X_u \doteq X_{\text{pool}} \backslash X_\ell$ as the set of unlabeled points in $X_{\text{pool}}$. The aim of active learning is to minimize the error $\mathcal{E}(f_\theta)$ while querying only $Q$ points from $X_{\text{pool}}$, and training $f_\theta$ with them.

## III. CLASSIFICATION VIA GRAPH DIFFUSION

We use the optimized latent representation to construct a KNN-based weighted proximity graph $G = (V, E)$, where

$$W_{ij} = m\left(-\frac{\rho(f_\theta^n(x_i), f_\theta^n(x_j)}{\sigma_{ij}}\right) I\{j \in N(i)\} \tag{1}$$

with $m$ as a similarity metric, and $\rho$ as a distance metric. In our setting $\rho(f_\theta^n(x_i), f_\theta^n(x_j)) = \|f_\theta^n(x_i) - f_\theta^n(x_j)\|_2^2$, $\sigma_{ij} = \max_{j \in N(i)} \rho(f_\theta^n(x_i), f_\theta^n(x_j))$, and $N(i)$ are the $K$-nearest neighbours of $f_\theta^n(x_i)$. The transition matrix is given by

$$M \doteq D^{-1}W, \tag{2}$$

where $D$ is diagonal with $D_{ii} = \sum_j W_{ij}$.

Label diffusion can be considered as a Markov process to propagate the label information of $X_l$ to $X_u$. Specifically, the one-step transition probability between states $x_i$ and $x_j$ is given by $p_{ij} = \mathbb{P}\{x_i \to x_j\} = M_{ij}$. We employ a random walk on $G$ as a mean to assign a label to $x_i \in X_u$. The predicted label of $x_i$ is associated with the probability of arriving to a labeled point $f_\theta^n(x)$ of class 1 (w.l.o.g.) after performing a $t$-step random walk starting at $f_\theta^n(x_i)$. Marking this probability as $p_t(y(x) = 1|i)$, it can be derived by the recursive relation

$$p_t(y(x) = 1|i) = \sum_j p_{t-1}(y(x) = 1|j) p_{ij}. \tag{3}$$

We associate the random walk probability $p_t(y(x) = 1|i)$ with the classification probability $p(y(x_i) = 1|x_i)$. For labeled points $x \in X_\ell$, $p(y(x) = y|i) = 1$. Denoting $2p_t(y(x) = 1|i) - 1$ by $\chi_i$ we see that $\chi_i \in [-1, 1]$ and its sign can be used to generate binary labels. Denote

$$D = \begin{pmatrix} D_{ll} & 0 \\ 0 & D_{uu} \end{pmatrix}, W = \begin{pmatrix} W_{ll} & W_{lu} \\ W_{ul} & W_{uu} \end{pmatrix}.$$

In matrix form $\chi_u = [D_{uu}^{-1} W_{ul} | D_{uu}^{-1} W_{uu}] \begin{pmatrix} \chi_l \\ \chi_u \end{pmatrix}$.

Let the graph laplacian $L = D - W$ in the system, then

$$L_{uu}\chi_u = W_{ul}\chi_l \iff L_{uu}X_{uu} = -L_{ul}y_l. \tag{4}$$

(4) above can be solved via the iteration:

$$\chi_i^{(t+1)} = \frac{1}{L_{uu,ij}} \left( -(L_{ul}y_l)_i - \sum_{j \neq i} L_{uu,ij}\chi_j^{(t)} \right). \tag{5}$$

(5) is transducing a label $\chi_i^{t+1}$ to $\chi_i$ as a weighted average of the labels of its neighbors with the transition probabilities as weights. The labels are propagated to $X_u$ gradually for $t$ steps. At the $t$-th step,

$$\chi_{ic}^{(t)} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } x_i \in X_l \ \& \ c = y_i \\ -1 & \text{if } x_i \in X_l \ \& \ c \neq y_i \\ 0 \ if \ t = 0, \ else \ (M\chi_{:,c}^{(t-1)})_i & \text{if } x_i \in X_u. \end{cases}$$

We provide the multi-class case in the supplementary material.

## IV. ACTIVE LEARNING

We begin with introducing our query selection criterion and prove its important transition from exploration to refinement.

### A. Query criterion.

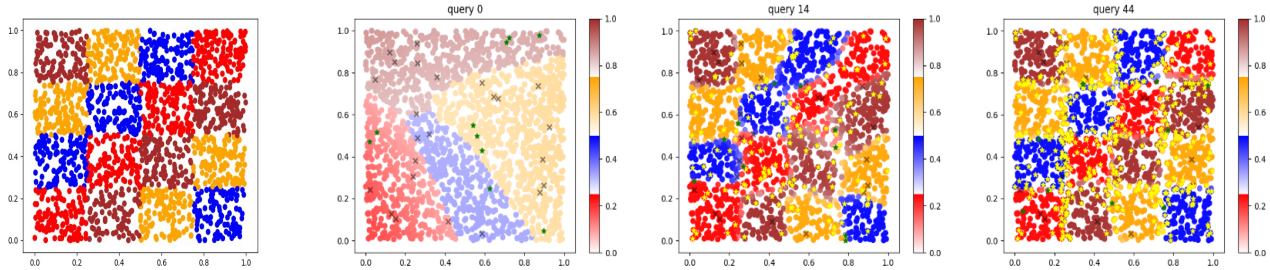
$\chi^{(T)}$ values can be used realize the *uncertainty* on whether vertex $i \in \{i_1, ..., i_{|pool|}\}$ belongs to class $c$. The magnitude can be used to select a new batch to query as

$$\hat{X} = \arg\min_{i \in X_u}^B \min_{c \in [C]} \left| \chi_{c,i}^{(T)} \right|, \tag{6}$$

where $\min^B$ denotes the $B$ smallest elements. The selection criterion in (6) fits the one-vs-all approach above. In supplementary material other variants are suggested.

### B. Exploration and Refinement.

The query criterion (6) coupled with the diffusion process enables the exploration of the data set at early stages of active learning, and the switch to refinement when exploration has saturated. This observation is based on the convergence of the diffusion iterant $\chi^t$ to the second eigenvector $\phi_2$ of the graph's




Ground truth | First query batch | 14 query batches | 44 query batches

Figure 2: Exploration & Refinement in Multiclass Checkerboard. Left to right: Ground truth, 1st batch (exploration, 30% accuracy), 14 batches (exploration, 82% accuracy) and 44 batches (Refinement, 95% accuracy). Color coding corresponds to label assignment and its intensity level to the magnitude of the diffused labels. Light yellow points represent so-far queried points, black points represent current query. Transition from exploring the distribution in (0-14 batches) to focus on boundaries (44) batches

Laplacian as $t \to \infty$. We show in our analysis below that the 2nd eigenfunction can be used to sample data for labeling with an optimal exploration-refinement trade-off.

To realize this we observe that at early stages of label acquisition low magnitude entries in $\chi$ correspond to data points that are unreachable from the training set via diffusion and need to be explored. At later stages all unlabelled data points $f_\theta^n(X_u)$ are reachable via diffusion from the labelled set $f_\theta^n(X_l)$. At this stage low magnitude $\chi$ entries correspond to the transition between the two classes -1 and 1. These nodes capture the eigenvector's transition from negative to positive entries. Therefore, sampling these points corresponds to the refinement of the decision boundary. We provide the convergence result to the second eigenvector of the graph Laplacian in Lemma (1):

**Lemma 1.** *Let $\lambda_1, ..., \lambda_n$, $\phi_1, ..., \phi_n$ be the solutions to the system: $L\phi = (1-\lambda)D\phi$. Then $\chi^{(t)}$ converges to $\phi_2$ via the iteration (10) with $M$, as $t \to \infty$.*

The eigenvector $\phi_2$ is a solution to the relaxed Minimal Normalized Cut problem (*MinNCut*) [5] in a graph $G(V, E, W)$ constructed from data representation in the hidden layer $f_\theta^n$:

$$MinNCut = \arg\min_{h:h^T D\mathbf{1}=0} \frac{h^T L h}{h^T D h}. \tag{7}$$

At the limit, the eigenfunction $\phi_2$ is approximately piecewise constant with opposite sign on each of the two blocks corresponding to the negative and positive labels [5]. Therefore the criterion (6) captures first the unexplored data points whose label magnitude is 0 (exactly). Once diffusion from the labelled set reaches all nodes the eigenfunction has full support. At this stage the criterion (6) switches to sampling at the eigenfunction's inflection point and refines the decision boundary.

Iterations (5) are only run for a few time steps instead of until full convergence. In exploration stage labels are samples to reduce the diffusion time to convergence by cutting the distance between the training points. In particular, in the exploration stage the 0-label magnitude corresponds to points unreachable from the training set, and therefore the distance to the nearest training point is reduced by at least $T$ hops in the random walk.

**Algorithm 1** DDAL

**input:** data $X_{\text{pool}} = \{x_i\}_{i=1}^N$, labeled subset $X_\ell^0$, model $f_\theta$ trained on $X_\ell^0$, $Q$, $B$, $M$, $T$
**while** budget $Q$ is not exhausted: **do**
  **compute** $G = (V, E, W)$ using $\{f_\theta^n(x_i)\}_{i=1}^N$
  **initialize** $\hat{X}_\ell^0 = \emptyset$
  **for** $i = 1$ **to** $R = \frac{Q}{B}$ **do**
    **initialize** $\chi^{(0)}$ according to $X_\ell^0 \cup \hat{X}_\ell^{i-1}$
    **for** $t = 1$ **to** $T$ **do**
      $\chi^{(t)} = M\chi^{(t-1)}$
      $\chi^{(t)} = \chi^{(t-1)}|_{(X_\ell^0 \cup \hat{X}_\ell^{i-1})}$
    **end for**
    **query** $\mathcal{S} = \arg\min_{k \in \hat{X}_u^i}^B \min_{c \in [C]} \left|\chi_{c,k}^{(T)}\right|$
    **update** $\hat{X}_\ell^i = \mathcal{S} \cup \hat{X}_\ell^{i-1}$
  **end for**
  **retrain** $f_\theta$ with $\hat{X}_\ell^i$
**end while**

We demonstrate the utility of our criterion in switching from exploration to refinement on a checkerboard toy example - Fig. 2. Exploration is observed to become saturated, as the joint data-label distribution is sufficiently mapped. At that stage DDAL automatically switches to refining the decision boundaries. We provide the pseudo code of DDAL in algorithm 1, for sampling query batches of size $B$.

### C. Running time and parameter selection

The running time analysis is composed of three parts. The first part includes the computation of the $K$-NN graph. The proximity search computational cost can be reduced from the naive search cost by using procedures for $K$-NN search based on KD [4] or ball trees [17]. Such methods have complexity $O(dN \log N)$, with $d$ as the dimension of the space. Other alternatives include approximate search ([6]). In the second

part, the diffusion vector $\chi$ is multiplied with the transition matrix. Addressing its sparsity as $O(KN)$ non-zero entries, this operation scales linearly in $N$ as $O(TKN)$. $T$ and $K$ determine the level of confidence imposed by the diffused training set over the unlabeled set. Higher $K$ imposes strong confidence in the current labeling hypothesis, but renders the diffusion more exhaustive. Similarly, large number of iterations $T$ may result in an overly smoothed (and less informative) signal $\chi^{(T)}$. During exploration, large $T$ imposes an hypothesis that may be locally correct but is far from being globally reliable. In our experiments, we use $T \simeq \log_K N$, with the intention to cover most of the graph via diffusion: assuming a diameter-balanced graph [19]. The cover requires $O(\log_K N)$ iterations, if the labelled set is small (i.e. $|X_l| \approx O(1)$, as typical in active learning settings). We use $K$ sufficiently high to allow graph connectivity. This parameter selection leads to a diffusion process that scales as $O(KN \log_K N)$.

Finally, a batch of smallest soft-labels needs to be queried. This requires a quick-sort to be applied to the soft labels magnitude, which scales $O(N \log N)$. We conclude that the running time of DDAL is $O(dN \log N + KN \log_K N + N \log N)$, whereas for a constant $K$ can be further simplified to $O(dN \log N)$. We note that the number of units in the penultimate layer $d$ is typically small.

## V. SAMPLE COMPLEXITY ANALYSIS

We analyze two fundamental graph structures that model the two stages of exploration and refinement in the hidden layer graph representation. We address the binary setting to facilitate the analysis. The first case addresses the early exploration stage, as the hidden layers representation is not sufficiently adapted to the class function, and therefore separation between classes is not detectable. We model this setting as a $K$-regular graph or a grid (similarly to the work of [7]). The binary class function divides the grid to two regions in which each class resides. Localization of the decision boundary is still not achieved by the learner at this exploratory stage, as we show that the query complexity of a full recovery of the graph-cut scales linearly in the size of the boundary set and logarithmic in $N$.

The second case captures a learning stage of a converging network with a larger training set at the mature refinement stage. In this phase, well-separated clusters emerge in the hidden layer representation, which correspond to label assignments.

### A. The non-separable grid case.

**Definition 1.** A $d$**-dimensional weighted grid graph** is defined as the weighted graph $G(V, E, W)$ on the $\sqrt[d]{N} \times ... \times \sqrt[d]{N}$ grid of $N$ nodes constructed via the graph Cartesian product on the $\sqrt[d]{N}$ line graphs. The edge weights $W_{ij}$ are fixed.

**Definition 2.** The **balancedness** $\beta$ of a labelled set $C = \{(x_i, y_i)\}_{i=1}^N$ is defined as $\beta = \min_j \frac{|C_j|}{N}$.

**Theorem 1.** *Let the graph $G(V, E, W)$ correspond to a $d$-dimensional regular grid, and assume that the grid is partitioned by the cut set $C$ of size $|\partial C|$ with balancedness $\beta$. Then the sample complexity of $BatchQuery$ for recovering the cut with probability at least 1 - $\delta$ for any $\delta > 0$ is*

$$\frac{\log \frac{1}{\beta\delta}}{\log \frac{1}{1-\beta}} + O(d \log_K N + |\partial C|). \tag{8}$$

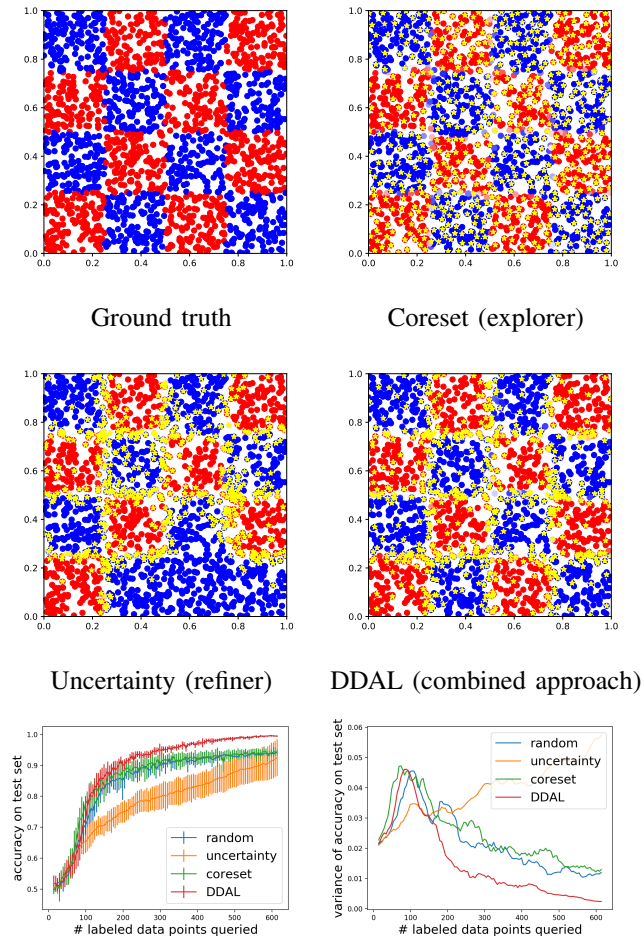



Figure 3: Exploration vs. refinement in the checkerboard example. **Top**: from left to right: *(1)* Binary checkerboard dataset *(2)* Points queried (in yellow) using: *coreset* exploratory criteria [21] *(3) uncertainty* refiner criterion [14] *(4) our* criterion. **Bottom**: (left) Corresponding curves of accuracy versus size of training data set, and (right) accuracy variance for the above algorithms demonstrate the advantage and robustness of the combined exploration-refinement approach in DDAL.

### B. The separable case.

At the advanced refinement stage the hidden layer representation has structure comprising separated clusters that correspond to different label assignments. The K-NN graph, in this case, has a minimal cut that corresponds to the decision boundary between the two classes. We analyze the query complexity of well-separated class samples via a Gaussian Mixture Model (GMM) $w_1\mathcal{N}(m_1, \Sigma_1) + w_2\mathcal{N}(m_2, \Sigma_2)$ modelling two densities in the hidden layer representation. The separation

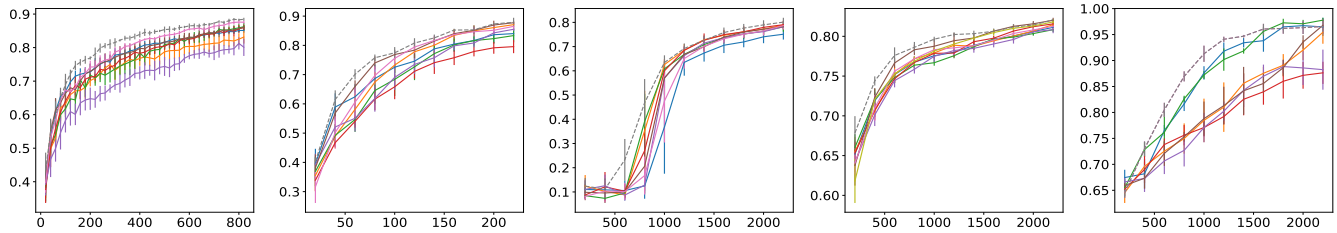


Figure 4: Accuracy vs. queried points. From left to right: MNIST (fully connected), MNIST (convolutional), SVHN, CIFAR10, and Openml155 datasets. The x-axis represent the labels queried, while the y-axis represents test set accuracy. Legend: (–) random, (–) uncertainty, (–) coreset, (–) bayes-entropy, (–) entropy, (–) margin, (–) bayes-uncertainty, (–) badge, (- -) diffusion.

$S$ is defined as the minimal distance between the centroids, relative to the covariance:

$$S = \frac{\|\mu_i - \mu_j\|}{\sqrt{d}\left(\sqrt{\lambda_{\max}(\Sigma_i)} + \sqrt{\lambda_{\max}(\Sigma_j)}\right)}. \tag{9}$$

**Theorem 2.** *Consider a Gaussian Mixture Model of 2 well-separated ($S >> 1$) Gaussians of balancedness $\beta$. Let the graph $G(V, E, W)$ be the KNN graph constructed from the GMM samples with weights according to eq. (1). Then $BatchQuery$ will recover the decision boundary with probability $1 - \delta$ by querying $\log \frac{1}{\beta\delta}\left(\log \frac{1}{1-\beta}\right)^{-1}$ points.*

## VI. EXPERIMENTS

**Exploration vs. refinement: a toy example** We consider the binary checkerboard (Figure 3), which demonstrates the utility of refinement vs. exploration criteria [3]. The comparison demonstrates how different criteria tend to operate: Refinement-based criteria - *uncertainty* [14], tackle decision boundaries as soon as they individuate them. Lacking proper exploration, it results in a completely mis-classified region. On the other hand, exploratory criterion, such as *Coreset* [21], does not fully detect the decision boundary. Finally, DDAL operates in two phases: first, it explores the distribution to discover all decision boundary and then localizes them. Accuracy results and stability results in Figure 3-bottom demonstrate DDALs performance compared to other criteria.

**Benchmark evaluation.** In Figure 4 we provide a performance comparison with other active learning methods. We selected fundamental approaches: refinement (e.g. uncertainty [13] and entropy [9]), exploratory (e.g. Coreset [21]), and a combined approach (e.g. 'margin' [20, 15] and Badge [1, 2]). Our selections were guided by i) comparing the exploration-refinement trade-off between different active learning approaches, and ii) comparing deep active learning approaches. We experiment with the following benchmark classification problems: MNIST, CIFAR10, Openml155 [24], and SVHN. Additional experimental details are reported in the appendix.

The advantage of DDAL is prominent during the early exploration and transition to refinement. The competitive accuracy persists into the longer tail of the refinement stage.

**Robustness study.** We examine the robustness of DDAL and state-of-the-art for the choice of batch size and number of epochs in Figure 5. For large batch size the criterion in (6) becomes more exploratory. Namely, it probes points with larger distance between them. This is more advantageous in the early stages of learning. Small batches may focus more on refinement of the decision boundary and may give better gains at later stages. Conversely, when the batches are small they are revisited more often by the optimizer in each of the active learning iterations, and therefore faster convergence is observed.

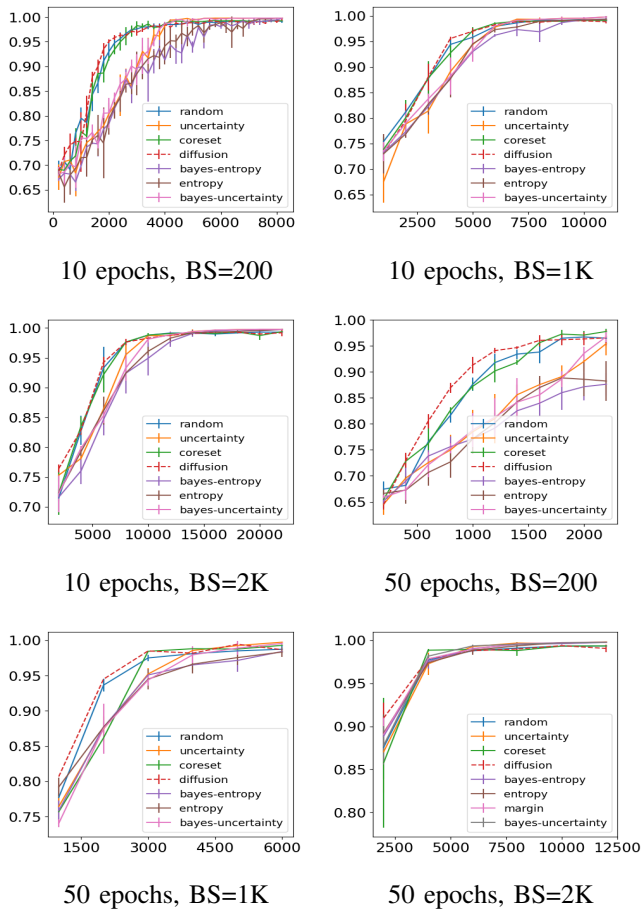



Figure 5: Effect of query size & epochs on performance in Openml 155.

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