ML Algorithms for Code Intelligence and Teaching

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Overview

Ten ML algorithms and architectural patterns form the complete stack for building code intelligence systems — models that generate, understand, search, fix, and teach code.

This document is for engineers building or evaluating AI coding tools, and for teams assessing how competitor products are likely built. Each section covers one algorithm class: what it does, why it applies to code, and where it appears in production systems.

1. Transformer / Attention Architectures

The backbone of every serious code model. Self-attention lets the model relate `function foo()` on line 3 to the call on line 847 — something RNNs cannot do at any useful sequence length.

Three variants matter for code:

- **Decoder-only** (GPT lineage) — autoregressive, predicts the next token. What Copilot, CodeLlama, and StarCoder run on. Best for generation.
- **Encoder-only** (BERT lineage) — bidirectional context; no generation. Best for classification, semantic search, and bug detection.
- **Encoder-decoder** (T5 / CodeT5 lineage) — reads the full input, then generates. Best for translation: Python → TypeScript, pseudocode → implementation, natural language → SQL.

2. Code2Vec / Code2Seq — AST Path Embeddings

Represents code as sampled paths through its Abstract Syntax Tree rather than raw token sequences. Each path connects two leaf nodes through the tree root. The model learns dense vector embeddings per method from the average of those paths. Used for method naming, clone detection, and semantic similarity.

3. Graph Neural Networks on Code Graphs

Code has four natural graph representations, each capturing different semantics:

Graph	Captures
AST — Abstract Syntax Tree	Syntactic structure
CFG — Control Flow Graph	Execution paths and branching
DFG — Data Flow Graph	Variable dependencies
PDG — Program Dependence Graph	Combined CFG + DFG

GNN variants applied to these graphs:

- **GCN** (Graph Convolutional Network) — aggregates neighbor node features
- **GAT** (Graph Attention Network) — weights neighbors by learned attention
- **GGNN** (Gated Graph Neural Network) — sequential message passing with GRU gates

Used in vulnerability detection, type inference, and dead code analysis.

4. Sequence-to-Sequence with Pointer Networks

For tasks where the output copies from the input — variable renaming, refactoring, docstring generation — the pointer mechanism lets the decoder point back to input tokens rather than only sampling from vocabulary. Used in code summarization and commit message generation.

5. Contrastive Learning — CodeBERT / UniXcoder Style

Trains a model so that semantically equivalent code snippets land near each other in embedding space, and non-equivalent snippets are pushed apart. Loss function is NT-Xent or InfoNCE.

- **Anchor**: `def add(a, b): return a + b`
- **Positive** (same semantics): `def sum_two(x, y): return x + y`
- **Negative** (different semantics): `def mul(a, b): return a * b`

Used for code search (natural language → code retrieval), clone detection, and test-to-code linking.

6. Tree-LSTM

Standard LSTMs process flat token sequences. Tree-LSTMs propagate hidden state from child nodes up to parent nodes through the AST, preserving hierarchical structure that flattening discards. Better than sequence models for tasks where the parse tree structure is the signal: type checking, semantic equivalence, synthesis.

7. RLHF and RLEF for Code Quality

Reinforcement Learning from Human Feedback (RLHF) trains a reward model on human preferences, then uses PPO to push the base model toward higher-reward outputs. For code, the reward signal can come from execution rather than human judgment — this variant is called RLEF (RL from Execution Feedback): run the generated code, check whether tests pass. Execution feedback is more objective and scales better than human annotation. Used in AlphaCode and DeepMind's competitive programming work.

Pipeline: base model → supervised fine-tune on accepted code → reward model trained on preferences → PPO optimizer maximizing reward.

8. Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) for Code

Rather than generating purely from parametric memory, RAG retrieves similar code examples at query time and conditions the generator on them. Critical for rare APIs and domain-specific libraries where pure generation fails.

Retrieval index is built with FAISS (Facebook AI Similarity Search) over dense embeddings from CodeBERT or similar. At inference: embed the query, retrieve top-k similar examples, concatenate as context, generate.

9. Neural Program Synthesis — PCFG + Neural Guidance

For teaching structured programming concepts rather than mimicking token patterns:

- A **Probabilistic Context-Free Grammar** (PCFG) defines the space of syntactically valid programs
- A neural network predicts production rule probabilities conditioned on the input specification or examples
- Beam search or MCTS explores the grammar space guided by those probabilities

Guarantees syntactic validity by construction. Used in FlashFill (Excel formula synthesis), DeepCoder, and DreamCoder.

10. Curriculum Learning — The Pedagogical Component

Curriculum learning is the specific algorithm that makes a system a *teacher* rather than just a generator. Rather than training on random samples, it orders examples by difficulty and exposes the model to harder material only once it has mastered easier material.

Difficulty is measured by:

- **Loss magnitude** on a pre-trained reference model — harder examples yield higher loss
- **Kolmogorov complexity** approximation — shorter programs that are harder to compress are more complex
- **Competence-based curriculum** — the model's own current accuracy on held-out examples gates what it sees next

This separates "dump StackOverflow into a transformer" from an actual instructional system. It is why a well-designed code tutor can sequence hello-world → sorting → concurrency without manual curation of the exercise bank.

Recommended Stack

A production-grade code intelligence system combines several of the above. This is the stack that covers generation, search, quality, structure, and teaching in one architecture.

Layer	Component	Primary use
Embedding	CodeBERT / UniXcoder	Semantic search, clone detection, contrastive retrieval
Generation	CodeLlama 34B or StarCoder2	Token-level code generation, completion, translation
Quality signal	RLEF (execution feedback)	Fine-tuning toward test-passing output
Retrieval	FAISS over proprietary corpus	Rare API handling, domain-specific generation

Layer	Component	Primary use
Structure	GNN on CFG / DFG	Vulnerability detection, type inference
Curriculum	Competence-gated ordering	Exercise sequencing for instructional use cases

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Field	Value
Authors	Albert Lane & Robot (AR^OS™)
License	Albert Lane & Robot Proprietary — All Rights Reserved
SEC TCR	17684-273-411-436
Contact	lane.albert@pm.me
Web	albertlane.net
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