Students and others on Reddit see not the “humanities crisis” (the forest) but critical problems and issues (the trees).

Although the humanities are no doubt in crisis, as evidenced in the shrinking number of students enrolling as humanities majors, mainstream media generally does not take notice (see KF-1-1), leaving it to academics and campus newspapers to foreground the issue (see KF-4-3, KF-1-2). In addition to studying news media, WE1S thus also turned to Reddit—an unofficial but robust media source—to understand better how students discuss the humanities crisis.

We carved out from our overall C-38 collection of Reddit comments from 2006 to 2019 mentioning humanities, liberal arts, and the arts a subset of posts that also included the words student, major, or college. This became our collection C-39. An initial finding we made is that the number of Reddit comments in C-39 mentioning crisis is relatively low by comparison with those attending to issues and problems, which is congruent with our KF-1-3 finding that campus newspapers in particular present a rich anatomy of problems in the humanities and higher ed.

Studying Reddit comments with topic models allowed us to corroborate that initial finding and understand it better in light of the full-throated, often unfiltered discourse of Reddit. Looking into topic models of both our C-38 and C-39 collections (C-38.200 and C-39.200, both at 200 topics), we observed that the word crisis appears prominently only once in any topic. Economic crises in C-39.200 topic 12 relate to financial crises in general. But, other words semantically related to crisis such as issues and problems do appear prominently in heavily weighted topics in our models.

Ultimately, we were puzzled by the relation between crisis and problem in the discourse we modeled. At that point we turned for guidance to the OED’s etymologies of crisis (Greek krisis = “decision”) and critical (“of decisive importance in relation to the issue”). These suggested to us that problems and issues arise along a critical decision path. If a problem becomes critical at a decision point (such as where to allocate resources), it becomes a crisis.

This led us to view crisis in terms not just of practical issues in universities and society but also of what the humanities call critical theory and critique.

We concluded that crisis is woven integrally into humanities disciplines (including the way students on Reddit discuss the humanities) through the way critical thinking locates and resolves problems. Despite the fact that the “humanities crisis” is a relatively rare story in the media, humanities discourse by its nature (often spoken in rawer, direct forms in Reddit) casts the problem of the humanities in society today as a critical crisis.

Document collection studied: C-38 (start page); C-39 (start page)
Topic models studied: C-38.200; C-39.200 (200 topics)
Interesting sample topics in C-39.200: 12, 135
Representative Reddit posts in C-39.200: a, b
Evidentiary documentation for this key finding: 2019 crisis in the humanities report
Related resources: Benjamin Schmidt, “The Humanities Are in Crisis” (2018)