Teaching with Reddit
Documentation for using Reddit as a Blended Learning Environment

Sal Hagen

This document explains the use of the website Reddit as a 'blended learning' environment. It will offer a brief description of Reddit itself, an explanation on how to create and structure a subreddit, and how to subsequently use it *outside* and *inside* the offline classroom. After two iterations of the MA class 'New Media Theories Research Seminar' that employed a subreddit, we have found this to be productive for both the course organisation and content, and student feedback on the setup was positive. Using Redit primarily benefits classes that have a collaborative component and where students take up the role of class curators. As such, using Reddit as a learning environment might be of interest to any teacher interested in designing their classes to make students engage with the course content *outside* and *inside* the classroom. Though this guide is written for Reddit, other online platforms might be disposed in a similar manner.

# Contents

1. What is Reddit?

Referring to itself as "the front page of the internet", Reddit is the most popular online content aggregator on the globe, with a user base of around 300 million active users and Alexa ranking it as the 6th most popular website worldwide (2018). Created in 2005 by Aaron Schwartz, Steve Huffman, and Alexis Ohanian, Reddit is still powered by the same basic mechanism: users, referred to as "redditors", can publish content, comment on posts and "upvote" or "downvote" content they like or dislike. Well-received content becomes more visible as it moves up in a list of posts, powered by a ranking algorithm that takes into account the amount of up- and downvotes and the post's time of submission.
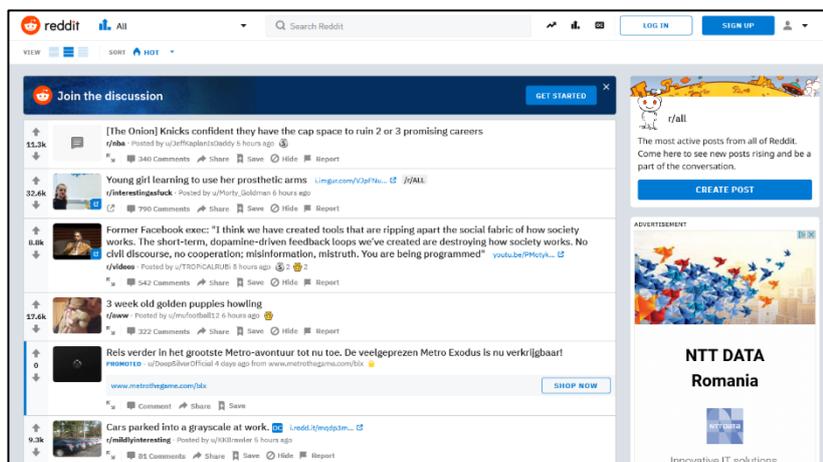
reddit.com/r/all

Reddit consists of thousands of topic-specific subforums called "subreddits", with topics ranging from obvious to obscure. Subreddits are often referred to with "r/" prepended to their names, inspired by their URLs (e.g. "reddit.com/r/worldnews"). Among the most popular subreddits are r/funny, a collection of a wide variety of humorous content, r/AskReddit, where redditors ask and answer provoking questions, and r/todayilearned, where redditors post intriguing facts. While these are the "mainstream" subreddits, the total variety of subreddits is a never-ending rabbit hole, ranging from r/musictheory to r/BabyElephantGifs and r/LegalAdvice to r/ShittyLifeProTips. Each redditor can subscribe to subreddits whose popular content are then aggregated on the redditor's personalised landing page. Opening the page of a specific subreddit serves as a curated 'mini-forum' on the wider website. On r/all, popular content from *all* subreddits is displayed, even those a redditor is not subscribed to, forming a "best of" collection of platform-wide content. Through its combination of intuitive platform mechanisms, a massive user base and strong sense of community, Reddit has become a cultural juggernaut in the contemporary digital media landscape.

What differentiates subreddits, apart from their topic interests, is that subreddit moderators can setup a ruleset to regulate commenting and posting. These rules can for instance make sure that adult content is not tolerated, that discussions in the comments remain civilised, or that comments that contest a specific political agenda are not allowed. This makes subreddits a particularly interesting environment for didactic purposes, where teachers can maintain an online environment dedicated to a course. Using Reddit as a didactic platform is quite unusual, but its collaborative features and moderation tools nonetheless make the platform suitable for these ends.
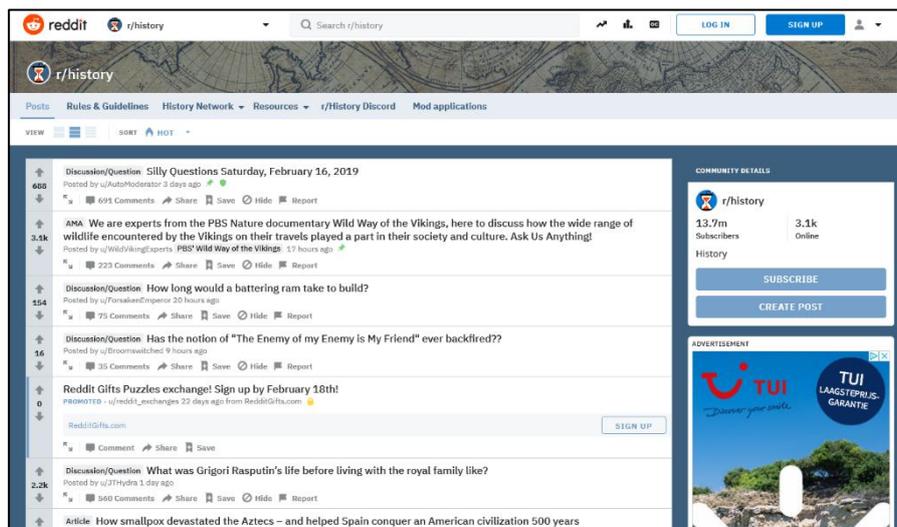
The subreddit reddit.com/r/history

2. Suitability of Reddit for your course setup

Although we have found it fruitful to employ a subreddit for a course, the usability wholly depends on your course setup. Using a subreddit can be particularly useful when:

- Seminar moderation by students is required
- Collaborative resource sharing is required or encouraged
- Students are likely to have organisational and/or practical questions about the course or the assignments
- The course is willing to engage with non-educational online environments as a didactic tool.

For more traditional course setups, a subreddit might bring in more problems than it solves. For instance, when a seminar mainly consists of literature discussion led by the teacher, a subreddit might be redundant.

As with any large user-driven website, it should further be noted that Reddit is not free of problematic content. While in the minority, certain subreddits display xenophobic, misogynist, and pornographic content. Luckily, subreddits can be used in a fairly isolated way, so these more problematic areas can be avoided when using a custom subreddit as a didactic device. Still, the fact that Reddit gives a platform to a plethora of content should be taken into account when deciding a setup as described here is suitable for the class.

3. Setting up a subreddit

To make use of Reddit as a teaching environment, you will have to make your own specific subforum dedicated to the course: a *subreddit*. This section will briefly explain how to create one. If this guide does not provide the answers you are looking for, there are many other guides on the Internet that probably will. Note that Reddit's interface is prone to change, so this guide might vary slightly from the platform's interface as time passes.

3.1 Creating the subreddit

1. First, create a Reddit account by clicking the 'Sign up' button on the top right and following the subsequent steps.

2. Once logged in, go to the front page (reddit.com) and click the 'Create Community' button on the right-hand side.
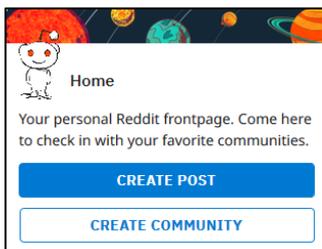
3. On the next pop-up window, give the subreddit a name (like the name of the class), and add a description. With 'Community Type', we advise to select 'Private'. This way, only selected users (i.e. students) can access and contribute to the subreddit.
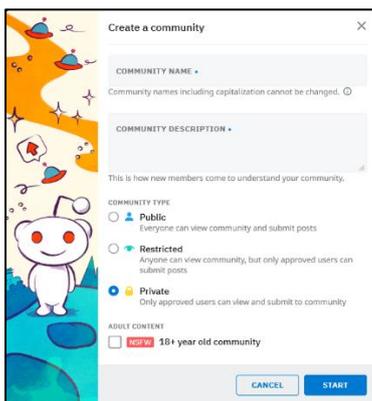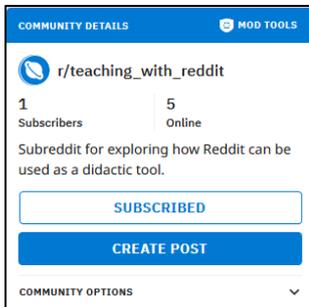

4. Click on 'Start' to create the subreddit. You are now a moderator of an empty subreddit!

3.2 Making posts

On the empty subreddit, you can start to add relevant posts, like information on course literature, a welcome message, or an inspiring link.

1. To add a post to your subreddit, click the 'Create Post' button on the right-hand sidebar.

2. There are three types of posts: 'Post', 'Image', and 'Link', as shown in the tabs. Posts of the type 'Post' consist of a body of text; 'Image' will link to a Reddit-hosted image or video; 'Link' will link to an outbound website.
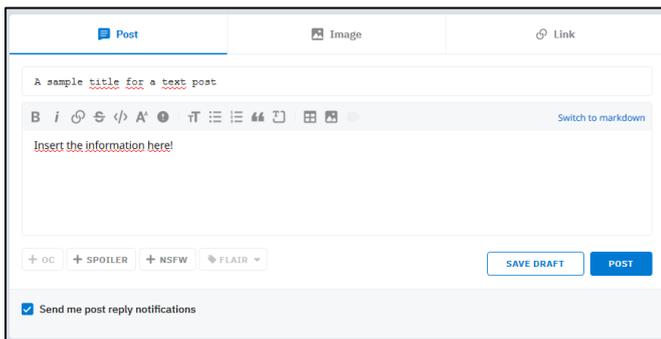
3. Give the post a title and insert text, an image, or a link.
4. Click the 'Post' button to add the post.
5. The post is now added to the subreddit and can be seen, commented on, and voted on by other users!
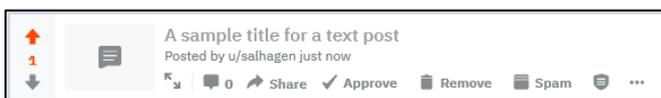
In our case, the teachers added posts about course literature, linking to the text and using it for questions and comments, as elaborated in section 4 of this guide.
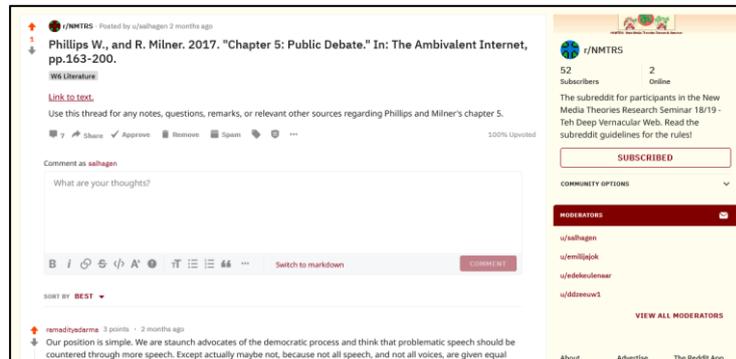

*Example post we made for course literature*

3.2.1 Sticky posts

For important announcements, you can make a so-called 'sticky post'. These are posts that are pinned to the top of the subreddit so they stay visible to all users. You can only sticky two posts, so you'll have to choose what is the most relevant information.

1. To make a sticky post, open the post you want to sticky by clicking the 'comment' button underneath the post title.
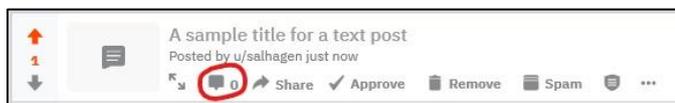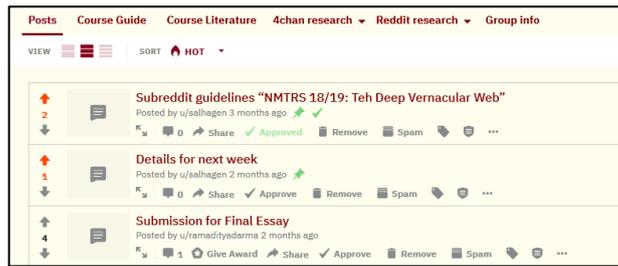

2. With the post opened, click on the 'mod tools' icon and checkmark 'sticky post'.
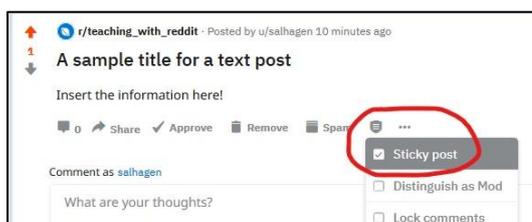
3. The post is now sticked!

In our case, we stickied the guidelines for the subreddit and ongoing information about the course, like information on assignments. For reference, see appendix I for the 'sticky' post we used to inform the students of the use of the subreddit.

*Two sticky posts (with the green pins) on organisational course issues*

3.3 Inviting users

If your subreddit was set to 'private' in section 3.2, you will have to invite users (i.e. students or co-teachers) to the subreddit so they gain access and can contribute.

1. Make sure all the students have signed up for Reddit and you know their usernames. In our course, we created a Google Drive spreadsheet during the first seminar and made the students list their name, student number, and Reddit username.
2. Go to the 'mod tools' page of your subreddit by clicking the 'Mod tools' button on the right-hand side.
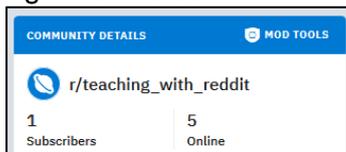
3. On the mod tools page, click on the tab 'Approved Submitters' on the left-hand side.
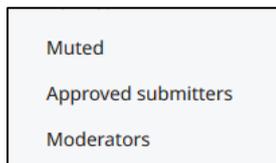
4. On the 'Approved Submitters' page, click the 'Approve User' button and insert the username of the student(s) (or co-teacher) you want to allow access to the subreddit.


3.4 Adding headers

Headers can be added to the top of your subreddit to link to important documents, such as the study guide or links to literature. It is also possible to make expandable headers that list a range of links.

The headers for the subreddit r/history

1. To add a header, go to the 'Mod Tools' page of your subreddit by clicking the 'Mod Tools' button on the right-hand side.
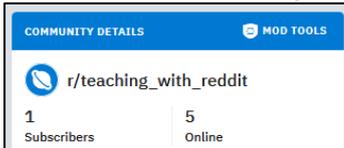
2. On the Mod Tools page, click on the 'Community appearance' tab on the left-hand sidebar.

3. You will now see your subreddit with an added sidebar on the left that provides options to style your subreddit.

4. To add a header to your subreddit, click on the 'Menu links' tab.

5. Click 'Create New Tab'. Now, you can either create one link or a submenu of links. Choose either one and insert the title and URL to your desired sources.
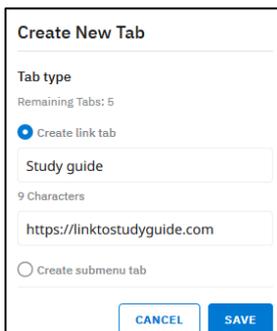
6. Click 'save' to add the header! You can add a maximum of five headers, but you can always use submenus to add more links.
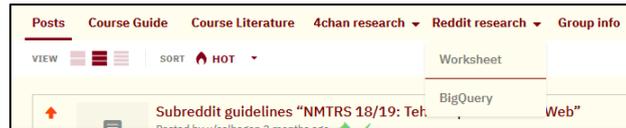
Headers we added to our course subreddit, listing the course guide, literature, and sources on research practices and methods.

3.5 Adding flair

Reddit allows to categorise posts, comments, and users with specific labels, called 'flair'. For the purposes of a learning environment, it is especially useful to annotate posts with specific flair. For instance, threads about literature can be given a 'literature' flair so the purpose of the thread is immediately clear. Differently flaired posts can be given a distinct look to make them stand out.

1. To add flair to a post, go to the 'Mod Tools' page of your subreddit by clicking the 'Mod Tools' button on the right-hand side.

2. On the Mod Tools page, click on the 'community appearance' tab on the left-hand sidebar.
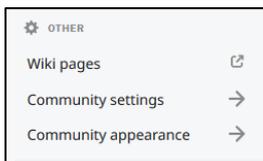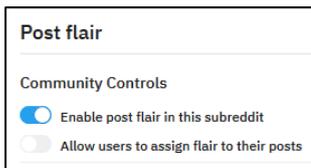

3. You will now see your subreddit with an added sidebar on the left, that provides options to style your subreddit.
4. Click the 'Post flair' tab
5. Make sure to enable post flair by selecting 'Enable post flair in this subreddit'

6. With flair enabled, you can add flair by clicking 'Add Flair'. Insert a flair text and (optionally) some styling options, such as the background and text colour. Click 'Save' to save the flair and add as many other flairs necessary.
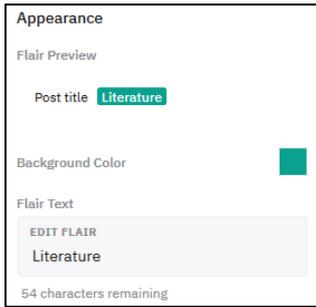
7. To add the newly created flair to a post, click on the flair icon on the post
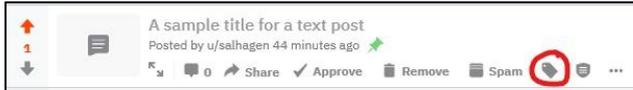
8. Select the desired flair you want to add, like 'Literature'. Click 'Apply' to add the flair.
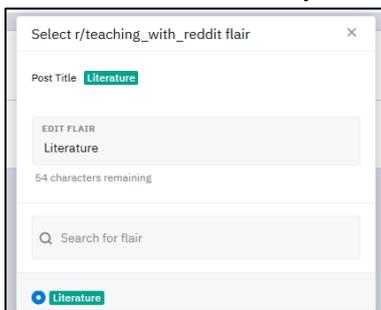
9. The flair is now added to the post!
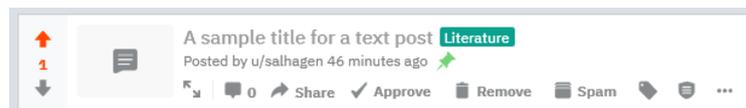
'Literature' flair added to a post

Maintaining the flair of post requires some labour, but we have found it to be a worthwhile process to keep the subreddit organised.

3.6 Styling

Reddit offers a range of other styling options to make sure the subreddit suits the theme of your course. These can all be found by going to the 'mod tools' page and then clicking the 'community appearance tab. Here, you can change settings like the colours, banner, or name.

4. Use cases and best practices

After having done two classes using a subreddit, we found its usefulness to be highly dependent on how it is employed. This section will cover a range of use cases and related 'best practices' for such a setup.

4.1 Use cases

A subreddit offers many different methods for 'flipped classroom' learning, which can be used as seen fit. Ultimately, we found a specific format that proved particularly productive. It made use of the subreddit in four use cases: (1) as an online collective note-taking hub, (2) as a source for 'offline' seminar curation, (3) as a platform for questions related to the course material, assignments, and setup, (4) as an archive for past editions of the class. We combined all of these, but they can also be used selectively, depending on your course setup.

4.1.1 Subreddit as a collective note-taking hub

Note keeping is a common practice to many students and staff in the university. Moving it to a shared online environment allows students and teachers to learn and comment on each other's insights, thus engaging with the course content in a collaborative manner. A subreddit can be used to form an online hub where students and teachers take notes on the course content, like weekly readings. In this way, it benefits subsequent offline discussion of the literature in-class, since part of the conversation has already taken place and students can be easily incentivised to elaborate or continue the online conversation.

In our case, after each seminar, we created one thread per piece of literature for the next class, like the following:
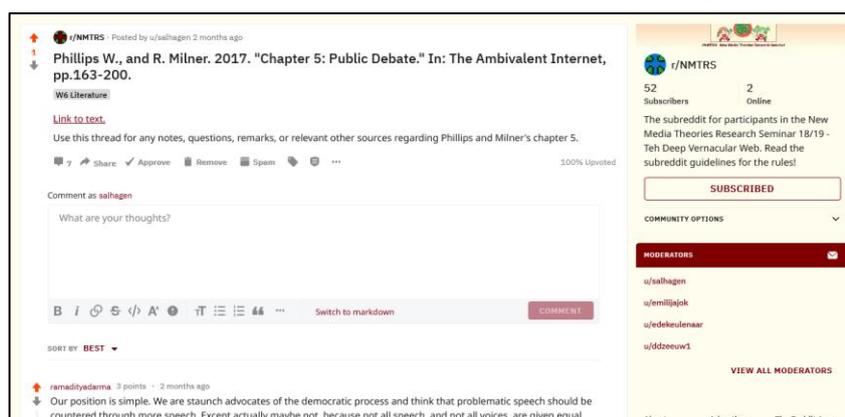
Example post we made for course literature

We then asked the students to comment on these literature threads questions, critiques, or related sources. Students commented on each other's questions and critiques, thus starting the collective conversation *before* the offline class happened. The up- and downvote

mechanisms ensured that relevant content would move to the first spot. The teachers can also chime in and ask the students questions.
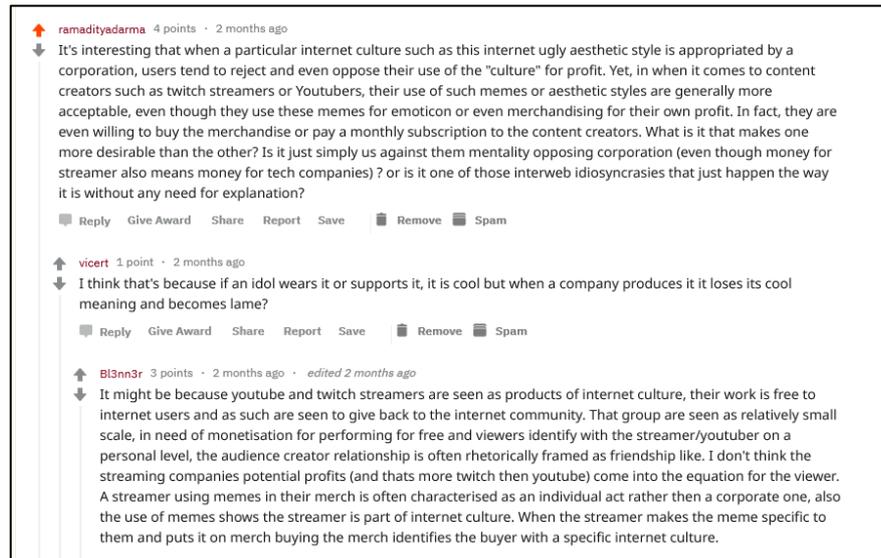
Example of student comments underneath a literature thread

While useful in itself, we found this online note-keeping to be highly fruitful when coupled with offline discussion.

4.1.2 Subreddit as a source for offline seminar curation

If the subreddit is filled up with comments, links, and other useful information, it can then serve as a source for discussion in the offline classroom. This can be done in many different ways. For instance, the teacher might go through comments and links posted by the students, or students can ask the teacher to show sources they posted on the subreddit themselves.

In our case, we found it especially productive when the offline class was coupled with the online notetaking as explained in the previous section (3.1.1). We used the notetaking as a source for class 'curation' by groups of students. In this setup, these 'curators' facilitated the weekly seminars. They were asked to use the threads on the weekly literature, which contained comments and questions of both the teacher and their co-students, as a basis for offline discussion. They could do so either by making a slideshow or simply by scrolling through comments on the relevant threads on the subreddit itself. For instance, a particular thread might have sparked a discussion on the subreddit, which could then be continued in the offline discussion. In another example, unanswered questions could be answered in the offline seminar. The curators could draw from the voting mechanism to determine what other students found relevant talking points.

We deliberately asked the students to *curate* and not *moderate* the class. Seminars in the humanities often use setups where students have to come up with a format to carry the entire

seminar, the so-called 'moderation' setup. In our 'curation' setup, the students still had to engage with learning how to incentivise others to discuss course content and pick up the main themes of the weekly literature, but where also not left entirely on their own because their co-students and the teachers had already offered talking points by replying to the literature threads. This way, it formed a fruitful middle-way between traditional teacher-led seminars on the one hand and student-led 'moderation' seminars on the other. Further, because every student had to curate at least once, there was a slight peer-pressure amongst the students to engage with the subreddit, since the weekly curators were dependent on the online comments of their co-students – else they had nothing to work with. We found that the online contribution in this setup was substantial and provided ample points for lively offline discussion.

To further increase the 'blend' of online and offline, we required one member of the curating group to make notes of the offline seminar discussion and post these on the subreddit after the class. This way, the offline discussion could be read by the students at their own leisure. This prevented the offline discussion to be forgotten once the students left the classroom. In this way, the offline and online contributions formed a fruitful feedback loop.

4.1.3 Subreddit as a helpdesk
A subreddit can serve as an online 'helpdesk' for students. For instance, students might have questions about the organisation of the course, or have practical questions considering assignments. These can then be posed as a 'Post' (i.e. text) post on the subreddit. When the teachers answers these before the offline class, more time can be devoted to discuss the course content. This can also be done via mail or other online environments like Canvas, but the benefit of a subreddit is that these questions can be seen by every student, so it keeps everyone on the same page. Additionally, a subreddit allows follow-up questions to be posted and questions to be answered by co-students.
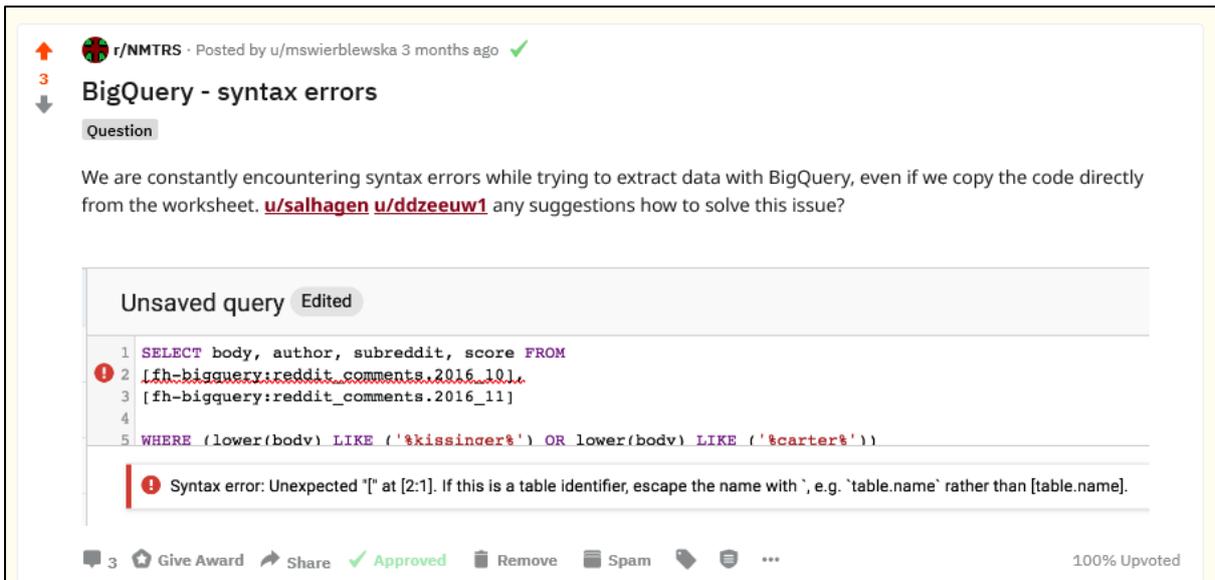
Example of a student question on our course subreddit
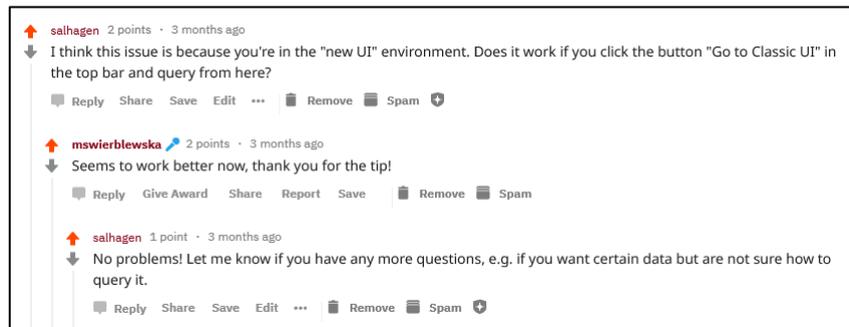
Answers to student questions as 'comments' underneath a thread

4.1.4 Subreddit as an archive

The subreddit can form an 'archive' of class-related information. This serves as a documentation of all that happened in the class, but it can also be inspiring to students of a next iteration of the class when the subreddit is carried over from one class to the other. Further, it might be extended past the timeframe of the course as a general resource for thematically related information. Note that past students will still have access to the subreddit when it will be used for the next iteration. Of course, if desired, it is also possible to begin with a clean sheet by creating a new subreddit.

5. Appendix I: Sticky post sample

Welcome to the New Media Theories Research Seminar 18/19 "Teh Deep Vernacular Web"!

In this sticky post, we note the guidelines for using this subreddit as an offline and online course environment. The purposes of the subreddit are fourfold:

1. The subreddit forms a collective note-taking hub for the course literature. After every seminar, the mods will add a thread for each piece of literature for the next session. Students are required to submit questions, annotations, comments, links, or other relevant materials connected to the literature of next week's class within these thread. In addition to replying to the literature threads, you are also encouraged to create your own threads with additional literature, links, or an incidental meme. Your replies have to be submitted each week by Monday evening at the very latest because of the second use of the subreddit.

2. The subreddit is the source for in-seminar curation. Starting the second week, a student group will curate the seminar by drawing from the notes and questions submitted by the students on the subreddit. The curators can make a selection of comments/question they find particularly interesting themselves, as well as using the up-downvote mechanisms of Reddit as a guideline for post relevance. This means that you should up- or downvote the posts you find particularly interesting, as it will increase the chance of it being discussed in the seminar. The selected posts should be answered or critically challenged by the curators as a starting point for group discussion within the seminar. To show these posts and critical responses within the seminar, the curators may make a presentation, but can also use the subreddit itself, for instance by replying to comments and questions they found of relevance. Note that the curators are *curating*, not *presenting*, meaning the fruitfulness of the curation depends on the group participation in the seminar.

3. The subreddit forms a helpdesk for technical and methodological problems. If at any point during the group work you run into technical or methodological problems, you can either (1) post a thread explaining your problem or (2) message u/salhagen. Use the former if you think your problem might be of relevance for the other groups as well. This way the subreddit allows for *online* help as well as an 'issue log' in preparation for *offline* help during the last hour of the weekly seminars.

4. The subreddit is an archive for past research and literature. As you can see, the content on the subreddit is from last year's "Meme War" course. Have a look at the results!

If you have any questions, message the mods: u/salhagen or u/ddzeeuw1