

Anthropologists Teach In

by Julia Sizek and Whitney Russell

Academics have recently called for renewed activism in the face of anti-intellectualism, classism, racism, anti-Semitism, ableism, and misogyny of the Donald Trump campaign and administration. Reaching back to New Left and civil-rights strategies and tactics, the teach-in has renewed relevance as a tool of political action.

Teach-ins are public events in which university faculty and students share their collective knowledge of critical issues with an explicit intent to generate media coverage, raise awareness, and change policy. This Teaching Tools post offers a guide to the history of the teach-in and its place in activism today.

The First Teach-Ins

On the night of March 24, 1965, thousands of people crowded into the University of Michigan's central campus buildings for the first "teach-in." Lasting until 8am the next morning, this faculty-led event took on one of the most controversial issues of the day: the Vietnam War. Throughout the night, students and faculty heard brief lectures and statements from a range of perspectives, followed by extensive question-and-answer sessions. The event kept going through two bomb threats, and culminated in planning meetings to decide next steps.

This model of the teach-in was quickly replicated at other universities including Columbia, Wisconsin, Rutgers, Harvard, New York, Brandeis, and others, all with a few shared characteristics. First, these teach-ins typically took place overnight in university-owned buildings. Second, students, faculty, politicians, and community members with no university affiliation were all in attendance. Third, at least one person was invited to speak in favor of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, although these invitations were often declined.

The National Teach-In at Washington was held on May 15, 1965. Three thousand students and faculty occupied the Sheraton Hotel, and the event was televised on closed circuit to nearly one hundred college campuses across the country.

Following the national event, one of the largest teach-ins occurred at University of California, Berkeley, where the Free Speech Movement had been launched only a year before. This event hosted about thirty thousand people for a thirty-six-hour teach-in beginning on May 21, 1965.

Further Reading

- [Origins of the Teach-In \(https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/teach-in-50/home/\)](https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/teach-in-50/home/)
- [Anti-Vietnam War Protests in the San Francisco Bay Area and Beyond \(http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificviet.html\)](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificviet.html)
- [Berkeley Teach-In: Vietnam \(http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/folkways/FW05765.pdf\)](http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/folkways/FW05765.pdf)

Context and Responses

After the Berkeley teach-in, organizer Louis Menashe compiled records, including what he called "The Ten Theses of the Teach-In." He articulated some of the changes in academia that corresponded with the teach-in moment, including:

- The decline in Cold War-supporting attitudes among academics, and a marked turn away from trusting government policy without interrogation. For more information on these shifts in anthropology, see David Price's (2004) *Threatening Anthropology*.
- An increased interest in transparency and public debate, and pushback by faculty and students that rejected the monopolization of information by the government.
- The beginning of decolonization and support for it by academics.
- The emergence of scholars from the ivory tower and into the realm of public debate to discuss not only intellectual issues, but also moral ones.
- The desire to have the university be a community of scholars and students, following from the active involvement of students in starting and sustaining the protests.

While popular, teach-ins were not universally accepted. Just as many professors supported the teach-ins, others refused to participate or claimed that they were tools of propaganda rather than education. Early responses to teach-ins included [accusations of anti-intellectualism \(http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificviet/teachinresponse.html\)](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificviet/teachinresponse.html), and debates about the extent to which protests and educational activities [should intermix \(http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificviet/burdicktranscript.html\)](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificviet/burdicktranscript.html). These responses, among others, are compiled in Louis Menashe and Ronald Radosh's (1967) *Teach-Ins: U.S.A.*

Particularly notable in this collection are J. William Fulbright's "The Higher Patriotism," in which he argues that "criticism, in short, is more than a right; it is an act of patriotism, a higher form of patriotism, I believe than the familiar rituals of national adulation" (212; published again in 1971 as the booklet "The Higher Patriotism") and Susan Sontag's "We are Choking with Shame and Anger," read at a Read-In for Peace on February 20, 1966, in which she tells her audience to reject indignation—instead to be angry, horrified, and afraid (349).

These debates about the role of activism in academia followed a series of heated debates about McCarthyism in the 1950s and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. The apex of anti-communist fervor likely came around the time of the implementation of the University of California [loyalty oath \(http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/uchistory/archives_exhibits/loyaltyoath/\)](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/uchistory/archives_exhibits/loyaltyoath/), in which in which all UC employees were required to sign an oath proclaiming themselves in support of the U.S. Constitution and against communism (for more information, see Ernst Kantorowicz's "[The Fundamental Issue \(http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/uchistory/archives_exhibits/loyaltyoath/symposium/kantorowicz.html\)](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/uchistory/archives_exhibits/loyaltyoath/symposium/kantorowicz.html)"). Prominent organizations and figures, including the American Psychological Association and [anthropologist Cora DuBois \(https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/free-and-fearless-inquiry/\)](https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/free-and-fearless-inquiry/), spoke out or boycotted the UC system as a result of this change. Resistance to McCarthyism was just the start, though, of broader coalitions that began to form as the civil rights movement and the student movement spread across college campuses throughout the 1960s.

References

- Menashe, Louis, and Ronald Radosh, eds. 1967. *Teach-Ins: U. S. A., Reports, Opinions, Documents*. New York: Praeger.
- Price, David H. 2004. *Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press Books.

Anthropologists Teaching In

Drawing from the 1936 General Motors *sit-down* strike that unionized the US auto industry and the civil rights *sit-ins* well underway in the American South, the *teach-ins* were positioned as an alternative to striking. Rather than refuse to teach, faculty would visibly reinforce their commitment to teaching by speaking publicly and openly through an entire night. The phrase “teach-in” is said to have been coined by Marshall Sahlins shortly before the Michigan event.

The teach-in, anthropologist Constance Sutton observed in 1966, “became a vehicle by which faculty could express their deep concern and present the basis for adopting positions of dissent to policies and actions which critically affect us all. As such, it is a form of education, but also a particular form of protest.” Sahlins, in an essay commissioned and left unpublished by the *New York Times Magazine* in 1965, describes the teach-in as a way to not only protest the decisions that the state was making, but the means by which consensus was made and demanded by the public under the notion of patriotism (the essay, “The Future of the National Teach-In,” can be found in Sahlins’s (2000) collection *Culture in Practice*). While he accepts the criticism that teach-ins cannot necessarily affect specific policies, he points to its ability to generate public support for positions policymakers may already have been interested in taking. In other words, the teach-in works to publicize an issue and to shift public opinion by generating, and nationalizing, general interest.

In a later editorial for *Anthropology Today*, Sahlins (2009) describes a climate of “rebels without a cause” wherein a thriving counterculture found their cause in the Vietnam War. The result was a merging of the countercultural and the political, and a successful nationalization of anti-war protest. He concludes by reflecting on the absence of a similar movement against the war in Iraq, suggesting it represents “a cause without the rebels.”

References

- Sahlins, Marshall. 2000. *Culture in Practice*. New York: Zone Books.
- _____. 2009. “The Teach-Ins: Anti-War Protest in the Old Stoned Age (<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8322.2009.00639.x>).” *Anthropology Today* 25, no. 1: 3–5.

Teach-ins Today

Recent teach-ins in the United States reflect wider shifts in activism. Many of these events are shorter, occurring during the day and often in collaboration between departments. In some cases, the University has attempted to hold their own, administration-sanctioned [teach-ins](http://www.kpbs.org/news/2010/feb/24/ucsd-minority-students-walk-out-teach/) (<http://www.kpbs.org/news/2010/feb/24/ucsd-minority-students-walk-out-teach/>), often with pushback from students. The technique itself, however, remains a viable tactic of campus activism.

On January 9, 2017, University of California, San Diego anthropology professors [Saiba Varma](http://anthro.ucsd.edu/people/faculty/faculty-profiles/saiba-varma.html) (<http://anthro.ucsd.edu/people/faculty/faculty-profiles/saiba-varma.html>) and [Joseph Hankins](http://anthro.ucsd.edu/people/faculty/faculty-profiles/joseph-hankins.html) (<http://anthro.ucsd.edu/people/faculty/faculty-profiles/joseph-hankins.html>) led a teach-in entitled “Combating White Supremacy: Local Strategies.” Varma credits the idea to UC graduate students, who asked faculty to create a series of teach-ins as part of a larger campus movement. She says it was important for anthropologists to be involved because “we’re supposed to be a discipline that’s connected to decolonization and creating a more equitable, inclusive, world. We’re supposed to be politically engaged and, historically, we have been.” However, Varma notes that anthropologists have sometimes “been late to the game.” “In this case,” she says, “we wanted to be relevant and timely. We felt it was important to be a part of this as it was going on. It was important for us to represent our discipline.” This teach-in was the first in a series that continued through January 20, involving faculty from history, literature, political science, and other disciplines.

Teach-ins can be held on one day or night or in a successive series. They can take place in campus buildings, common outdoor areas, or public spaces. The press may attend or even serve as partners, the goal being to reach as many people as possible.

Teach-Ins in the News

- [#teachingthedisaster](http://savageminds.org/2016/11/11/teachingthedisaster/) (<http://savageminds.org/2016/11/11/teachingthedisaster/>)
- [Society Must Be Defended Read-In](http://savageminds.org/2017/01/12/society-must-be-defended-a-read-in-on-20-january-2017/) (<http://savageminds.org/2017/01/12/society-must-be-defended-a-read-in-on-20-january-2017/>)
- [Berkeley Teach-In on Trump](http://www.dailyca.org/2016/10/18/students-gather-hear-faculty-speak-trump-teach/), October 2016 (<http://www.dailyca.org/2016/10/18/students-gather-hear-faculty-speak-trump-teach/>)
- [#BlackLivesMatter Teach-In at the University of Washington](http://www.com.washington.edu/2016/02/blm-teach-in-the-morning-session/), February 2016 (<http://www.com.washington.edu/2016/02/blm-teach-in-the-morning-session/>)
- [Teaching Positive Alternatives to Trump](https://www.eventbrite.com/e/teaching-positive-alternatives-to-trump-teach-in-for-activism-resistance-tickets-30440317810), January 2017 (<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/teaching-positive-alternatives-to-trump-teach-in-for-activism-resistance-tickets-30440317810>)
- [Onward/Adelante!, Rice University](http://www.ricethresher.org/article/2017/01/inauguration-day-events-aim-to-teach-protest), January 2017 (<http://www.ricethresher.org/article/2017/01/inauguration-day-events-aim-to-teach-protest>)

Teach-In Resources

In taking stock of the responses to Donald Trump’s election, it appears that teach-ins have renewed relevancy. If Sahlins was right to say that the Iraq War was a cause without rebels, then today’s “rebels” may be finding a common cause in resisting the Trump administration.

Even the 2016 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, held just after Trump was elected, was marked by shock, disbelief, and [conversations about what to do next](https://culanth.org/fieldsights/995-the-shattered-echo-chamber-experiences-of-amanth2016-in-the-wake-of-the-election) (<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/995-the-shattered-echo-chamber-experiences-of-amanth2016-in-the-wake-of-the-election>). Teach-ins are one way for anthropologists to act and to deploy our knowledge in a useful way. Below are some resources that could be used for teach-ins or classroom activities, both now and throughout the next four years.

Resources Drawn from the Cultural Anthropology Website

- [Islam in the Media](#) ([./fieldsights/683-teaching-representations-of-islam-in-the-media](#))
- [Comprehensive Immigration Policy . . . for Whom?](#) ([./fieldsights/54-comprehensive-immigration-policy-for-whom](#))
- [Badass Indigenous Women Caretake Relations](#) ([./fieldsights/1019-badass-indigenous-women-caretake-relations-nodapl-idlenomore-blacklivesmatter](#))
- [Teaching Occupy](#) ([./fieldsights/45-teaching-occupy](#))
- [Black Lives Matter](#) ([./fieldsights/696-blacklivesmatter-anti-black-racism-police-violence-and-resistance](#))
- [Crisis of Liberalism](#) ([./fieldsights/989-crisis-of-liberalism](#))
- [The Rise of Trumpism](#) ([./fieldsights/1030-the-rise-of-trumpism](#))

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Conversation

- [Teaching Tools \(/conversations/16-teaching-tools\)](#)

Studios

- [Cultural Anthropology Responds to Trump \(/collaboration_studios/1-i-cultural-anthropology-i-responds-to-trump\)](#)

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