

## Teach-Ins: Pedagogical Resistance and American Democracy

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Erstveröffentlichung / Primary Publication

Arbeitspapier / working paper

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

White, K. C. (2025). *Teach-Ins: Pedagogical Resistance and American Democracy*. (Political Communication Report, 31). <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-103946-6>

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**Political Communication Report**  
**Summer 2025 - Issue 31**  
“Teaching Political Communication”

**Teach-Ins: Pedagogical Resistance and American Democracy<sup>1</sup>**

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I have only marched once with university students on the campus where I have taught for the past twelve years. It was during a Black Lives Matter demonstration in the fall of 2015. We walked down a main street that runs through campus, at points with a police escort. What I remember most vividly from that march was the moment we passed a fraternity house, where young white men stood outside yelling racial insults and mocking the crowd as we passed by.

Perhaps a campus march seems like an unusual place to begin an essay on the significance of teach-ins in the American political sphere. But that moment stands out because it was one of the few times on campus that I engaged with students not as a professor, but as a peer—both a target of the jeering fraternity members and a marcher in solidarity with students of color pushing for change. Marching that day—being harassed alongside my students—was a reminder that the political struggles our students take on, and the histories and power dynamics we explore in teach-ins, are unfolding right here, on the campuses where we work and our students live.

University teach-ins do more than just help students make sense of the world beyond the Ivory Tower; they also equip them to navigate the inequalities within it. As professors, we work in institutions that claim to uphold democracy and equality, yet often rely on hierarchy, exploitative labor practices, predatory lending, and transactional credentialing. Scholars are sources of authority, influence, and knowledge—all while reproducing spaces that are white, often male dominant, ableist, and oppressive. The university, in this way, mirrors both the best and worst of our American society. Understanding the university as a key site of power, governance, and legitimacy is the first step toward recognizing the teach-in as a form of solidarity and resistance.

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As scholars, we often conceptualize teach-ins in ways similar to the classroom—professors speaking from a place of expertise, surrounded by students eager to learn. But teach-ins, like marches and other forms of political action, are inextricably linked to protest, public demonstration, and the importance of occupying space for democratic purposes. Student-led marches and rallies have long been essential tools in political education and organizing, particularly during times of social unrest. Likewise, the university teach-in emerges from a deep need for political engagement on urgent social matters.

## **Background**

For over sixty years, faculty across the country have organized teach-ins as a platform that opens political discourse, challenges institutional actions, informs a broad public, and opposes injustice. The teach-in movement began in 1965, after a failed attempt to launch a faculty strike at University of Michigan in protest of the Vietnam War. When threatened by state officials and university leaders over the proposed teaching moratorium, protesting professors instead decided to “teach-in.”

The concept and practice of the teach-in drew directly from civil rights activism taking place in the American South at the time. To teach “in” echoed the language of “sit-ins” protesting racial segregation and employed the advocacy teaching and training models of southern Freedom Schools focused on enfranchisement (Small, 2002). More than 100 US campuses participated in the first 1965 teach-ins: Michigan’s teach-in drew 3,000 people, and over 30,000 turned out in Berkeley (Sahlins, 2017; Schrecker, 2021). In Toronto, professors, activists, and even comedians like Dick Gregory came together to analyze political events and challenge the normalization of rising militarism and authoritarianism in American society, offering alternative visions of democracy. These gatherings underscored not just the importance of the moment, but the centrality of the university in American civic life.

## **Theorizing the Teach-In**

The anti-war teach-ins of the 1960s and 70s shaped our understanding of education as central to both movement building and democracy. Three key theories help articulate the importance of the teach-in: critical pedagogy, liminality, and democratic deliberation.

Critical pedagogy, most often attributed to Paulo Freire (2014), is an approach to teaching that centers liberation and overturning an unjust social order as essential to thinking and learning. In this model, students are learners taught to solve problems. Teachers, while holding epistemic authority, are also learners in the context of the teach-in—they learn “in dialogue with students” (ibid, p. 66). Dialogue is a key part of this paradigm. As Freire puts it “at the point of encounter there are neither ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know” (ibid, p. 74). In other words, dialogue

is an exchange of ideas and information that motivates work that will “transform the world”. Humility is a necessary element of this exchange.

Freire’s notions of critical pedagogy and dialogue also connect to ideals of deliberative democracy within political science. In order to make decisions that most benefit the public good, a deliberative democracy provides space for discussion, debate, listening, and the exchange of ideas—that is, space to deliberate (Elster, 1998; Steiner, 2012). Deliberative democracies insist on the importance of an engaged and informed electorate. This connects to the two key models of democratic citizenship as outlined by William Gamson, one of the founders of the teach-in movement. According to Gamson, citizens function in a democracy either 1) in a passive *limited citizenship* model in which citizens elect skilled and knowledgeable representatives who make complex policy decisions on their behalf, or 2) in a *strong democracy* model that requires citizens to fulfill a participatory role in making public decisions through learning and action. Dialogue and deliberation bolster the strong democracy model, which emboldens citizens, informs them, and pushes them to engage.

The teach-in can also be understood as a liminal space, what Victor Turner (2017) called a place of “statuslessness” (p. 97) and transition that it is “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention” (p. 95). A teach-in can be led by an activist or an actor, a scholar or a health worker—it occupies a learning space that bridges the classroom and the community. Though often held at universities, teach-ins are often not endorsed or sanctioned by university leadership. Within the traditionally rigid structures and routines typically used for thinking and learning, the teach-in becomes a ritual that forms community, revitalizes participants, and challenges tradition.

### **Reflecting on Experience**

When I imagine a teach-in, I picture a sunny college quad: students sitting on the grass, a professor—white, balding, and male, in a tweed jacket with elbow patches—addressing an attentive audience of long-haired students. It’s a nostalgic image, pulled from cultural memories and film sequences of 1960s student organizing that often omit the role of women and people of color in university activism. It’s also a kind of fantasy about the excitement and importance of learning in a crisis, and the role of ideas in shaping movements for a better world.

In darker times, the teach-in feels less romantic and more essential—a symbol of the role of education in preserving a free and open society. Amid rhetorical and budgetary attacks on education in the U.S., the need for a revitalized American teach-in movement feels more urgent than ever. Thinkers can distill ideas, clarify complex events, and help people navigate ideological conflict.

As a Black woman scholar, I do not look like the professor I imagine in the movie scene of 1970s university activism. And the teach-ins I have participated in have not taken place in sunny quads. One involved students crowded on the floor of a meeting room, where a panel of Black women professors addressed questions about the history and strategy of Black student organizing. Another, just last month, packed fifty staff, faculty, and students into a hot, sterile, gray room to talk about how to survive fascism. During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, a colleague and I organized a series of Zoom teach-ins to help university workers and researchers understand the evolving health crisis and its social implications.

I have also organized teach-ins outside campus. For several years, I have led an annual event for children to learn about and discuss the killing of Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager whose 2012 death ignited the Black Lives Matter movement. And following the police killing of George Floyd in 2020, a community nonprofit I lead hosted “anti-racist lawn chats”—informal outdoor gatherings where neighbors learned about racism, whiteness, and white supremacy. These came closest to my imagined teach-ins of the past in grassy fields, though they were led not by PhDs, but by trained community members and peers.

From these experiences, I’ve come to understand the teach-in as functioning in four key ways:

1. **Urgent** – They respond to pressing political events, policies, or crises.
2. **Collective** – They are grounded in shared ideals of democracy and justice.
3. **Action-oriented** – They aim to foster knowledgeable political participation and activism.
4. **Informed** – They draw on knowledge, expertise, and training to guide discussion, often in response to a larger public propaganda or disinformation campaign.

Scholars and advocates have used teach-ins to address issues from drug use and vaccination to policing, racial justice, carceral violence, and Israel-Palestine (Knippen, et al, 2020; McGrath, 2015; Minnick, et al, 2022; Poorvu Center for Teaching and learning, 2021, The Repair Project, 2025). Conservative groups, too, have adopted the teach-in model to share their views on campuses, such a David Horowitz’s teach-ins aimed at undermining Palestinian organizing (Lapkin, 2015). Teach-ins draw from a Jeffersonian belief that education is necessary for citizens to participate effectively in democracy and to preserve freedom and independence. To riff on the old cliché: those who can, do—and those who can teach, must.

Teach-ins, then, are rooted in a long tradition that affirms the importance of critical knowledge in struggles for justice. They foster flexible, timely, community-driven spaces that our formal classrooms do not always allow. In truth, teach-ins help create space where none exists.

## Conclusion

Teach-ins are not just academic exercises or nostalgic callbacks to the activism of the 1960s. They are living, breathing practices that bridge the gap between knowledge and action, between campus and community, between the ideals of democracy and the lived realities of inequality. They remind us that learning is not neutral and that teaching—especially in moments of crisis—is integral vital to our political world. Whether held in a stuffy conference room, on a front lawn, or over Zoom, teach-ins create space for shared inquiry, collective memory, and resistance.

As educators, we often ask our students to think about and describe the world. Teach-ins ask us to do more: to participate in building the world, and to make it better starting from where we are. They challenge the illusion of the university as an ivory tower and insist that it is, in fact, part of the very fabric of the struggles we study. To teach-in is to make knowledge public, urgent, and purposeful.

In times of disinformation, authoritarian drift, and institutional silence, the teach-in becomes a quiet but radical act—one that insists on clarity, connection, and community. And in doing so, it offers not only tools for understanding the world, but hope for changing it.

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