

How to plan a current events teach-in

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Key tasks/questions

- 1) Determine what your teach-in will look like
- 2) Identify people who can be part of the teach-in
- 3) Identify people willing to help with the teach-in
- 4) Setting up conversations for your group
- 5) Determine when they can collectively do it
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- 7) Setting your format
- 8) Broadcast your event
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- 11) Using the event to build a network

Determine What Your Teach-In Will Look Like

A teach-in is an opportunity to foster dialogue and education on pressing current events. The format can range from a panel discussion, a town hall-style forum, an interactive workshop, or a mix of these approaches. The primary goal is to create a space where participants can learn, ask questions, and engage with diverse perspectives while staying nonpartisan. Consider the scale of your event—will it be a small gathering or a large public forum? Clarifying your vision early on helps ensure that your planning stays focused and effective.

Identify People Who Can Be Part of the Teach-In

Having knowledgeable, well-prepared speakers is crucial. Look for subject-matter experts, community leaders, academics, journalists, or experienced activists who can offer insight into the topics you plan to discuss. Strive for a balance of viewpoints to reflect the complexity of political and societal issues fairly. Reach out to individuals willing to contribute their expertise in an informative rather than advocacy-driven way, ensuring that the teach-in remains educational rather than partisan. As you are thinking about this, consider both who might be willing to participate and how they would fit together into a larger narrative.

Make sure that you have a clear demarcation of what counts as informational and what counts as advocacy and when any of the latter might be acceptable or not. For the UM teach-in, we all agreed that it is fine for anyone to present information about politically charged topics, but should only take a normative stand if the question was about democracy or not.

Identify People Willing to Help with the Teach-In

Organizing a teach-in requires logistical and administrative support. Seek volunteers who can handle tasks such as outreach, event setup, moderation, technical support, and audience coordination. Universities often have ways to work through parts of this process, but understanding whether to use those resources depends on the University's relation to the event.

It's also helpful to involve people with experience in event planning, media relations, or facilitation. Establishing a dedicated team will help distribute responsibilities and keep the process manageable.

Setting Up Conversations for Your Group

Once you have speakers and volunteers identified, organizing communication among them is crucial for smooth coordination. Establish group messaging channels to facilitate planning and discussion. Tools such as GroupMe, Slack, or WhatsApp can be effective for managing logistics, scheduling, and task assignments. It may be helpful to have multiple discussion groups across a few of these topics. If the topic of the teach-in is sensitive or poses security concerns, consider using encrypted messaging apps such as Signal to protect conversations (with a deletion strategy). Having a clear, streamlined communication strategy helps ensure that all involved parties remain informed and aligned.

Determine When They Can Collectively Do It

Selecting a date and time that accommodates key participants is important. Survey potential speakers and attendees to identify availability, and be mindful of significant conflicts such as local events, holidays, or major political happenings that might affect attendance. Also think about your ideal audience when you are deciding upon a date and time. Students are likely to have classes and other activities in the middle of the days, but may have more availability in evenings especially earlier in the week.

Book a location

Choose a venue that is accessible and conducive to discussion. Universities, community centers, public libraries, and nonprofit spaces often provide free or low-cost event spaces. Consider logistical factors such as seating capacity, audio-visual needs, and accessibility accommodations. If you don't know how many people are coming, can you figure out an overflow possibility. If an in-person gathering is not feasible or if many folks cannot make it, virtual options like webinars or hybrid formats can be effective alternatives, but also introduce risks. What kind of audience you would like to have can alter the feasibility of different locations.

Setting Your Format

The format of your teach-in should be structured yet flexible. Options include keynote presentations followed by Q&A, panel discussions with audience interaction, small breakout groups, or a combination of these. Think about whether you want to include visual presentations, handouts, or digital resources. Ensure the structure encourages active participation rather than just passive listening. Digital tools can help to curate questions and also create a context where your presenters can continue to respond to individuals even if you run out of time.

Broadcast Your Event

Promotion is key to attracting attendees. Think about where your ideal audience gets information and consider tools like social media, community bulletin boards, organizational newsletters, and word-of-mouth to spread the word. Creating flyers or an event page with details on the topics covered, possibly the speakers, and how people can attend. Partnering with local organizations or using existing communities and newsletters can also help extend your reach. Figure out if you can use official distribution mechanisms and decide if you think that is appropriate. Involve the presenters by asking them to help spread the word and ask anyone who has offered to help.

Do You Want Media? If So, How to Get It

If you want media coverage, you should proactively reach out to local journalists (on campus and otherwise), community radio stations, or independent media outlets. A well-crafted press release outlining the purpose and significance of the event can help generate interest. If you don't have someone on your team who has distributed one, look for someone who can help here. Be clear on whether media will be allowed to record or report on the event, and communicate any ground rules to both attendees and journalists in advance. It is good to know what if any media will be there and to give them additional information about who is participating and what the purpose and parameters are. If you go this route, you will also need a media list. You can get a media list by reaching out to press people or by looking through your own emails from media outlets that have contacted you in the past. Many media folks also put contact information for news tips online. It is reasonable to send a press release to any journalist's email.

Considerations on External Risks and Broadcasting

Be aware that external actors may not be supportive of the teach-in's discussions. Broadcasting the event may attract unwanted attention, and media coverage could lead to misrepresentation or backlash. If you decide to record and disseminate the event, weigh the risks carefully. Consider setting guidelines on who can record, what can be shared publicly, and how to handle potential disruptions. If privacy is a concern, consider restricting access to a trusted audience or using private streaming options. Having a media strategy that includes crisis communication planning can help mitigate any unintended consequences. Also note that there may be

inaccurate claims about what was done or said even if there is not a recording, so there may be cases where a private recording could be protective.

For folks working at public universities, note that you may be subject to FOIAs. Know how your state FOIA rules work if someone asks for communication used in the planning of the event or an eventual recording.

Keeping People Safe (Individual and Collective Risk Aversion)

Ensure the safety of participants by establishing guidelines for respectful discourse and security measures. If discussing sensitive topics, consider how to protect attendees' privacy and well-being. Have a clear plan for handling disruptions, and if necessary, consult with security professionals or community mediators. If the event is virtual, take precautions to prevent disruptive behavior, such as requiring registration or moderating chat features (though note that documentation of attendance or registration leaves a record). If opposition to the event is expected, inform attendees of any security measures in place and provide a way for them to report concerns.

Using the Event to Build a Network

A teach-in can be a launching point for ongoing engagement. Provide attendees with ways to stay connected, whether through follow-up discussions, email lists, or social media groups. At UM, we decided to invite the entire audience onto a Discord channel that allows them to have a conversation and to plan any future actions. This lowers the cost of organizing for attendees and for future events. It also provides a forum for answering questions that could not be included in the original event.