

Teach-Ins:

Letter No. 27, to Pickering, Aug. 16, 1795:

"... Salem, Newburyport
approve . . .

"At M'Head and Cape Ann
they are all quiet and think
very well of . . .

At Portsmouth "all the best men . . .
No noise.

And no discussion.

CHARLES OLSON

By JOHN THOMPSON

The teach-in movement, which has swept North America and spread even further, is either much more or much less than "a new concept in current affairs instruction" (to steal Linda Strand's

phrase from last Friday's Gateway).

The basic structure of the average teach-in would hardly have seemed new 2,400 years ago in Greece.

A number of authorities are

brought together on a platform, or in a classroom, in front of students.

They present various stands on some burning current question. They support their stands with the most solid arguments they can devise. These arguments are chal-

lenged by the other authorities and by the audience.

The interplay of fact, opinion and argument generates excitement; hence the teach-in's dramatic appeal. In this interplay, fallacies glare more brightly and the truth stands—perhaps—revealed.

Obviously all this is not new.

Yet a great number of people not known for indiscriminate enthusiasm treat the teach-in movement as a potentially important breakthrough in higher education and a cheering step in the evolution of a more democratic America.

Since only a tiny proportion of the few teach-ins held so far in Canada have dealt with specifically Canadian problems, it is hard to say whether an equal excitement can be generated here. But only an unusually complacent Canadian could say Canada does not need the benefits which its fans claim the teach-in can provide:

- facts that get suppressed or (to use a wonderful word of which my high school social studies teacher was very fond) de-emphasized by the regular information-media

- points of view unfamiliar or unpopular in the community but deserving to be heard (and all opinions surely deserve to be heard)

- the intellectual stimulations resulting from the reasoned debate of issues with grave and immediate importance.

The issue of grave and immediate importance which precipitated the first teach-in and most of its successors is the War (known also as the Great Battle for Freedom, and as the Mess) in Viet-Nam.

It is not that nothing in pre-Johnsonian foreign policy was debatable; most opponents of the President's foreign policy would agree the seeds of the Viet-Nam

tragedy were sown long ago. But several factors delayed the development of a protest movement on campuses:

- the ghost of Joe McCarthy is being only slowly exorcised; in too many American eyes Communism is still the ultimate evil, anti-Communism the ultimate good.

- not until the successes of the civil rights movement became obvious did the shattered American tradition of organized protest pull itself together again

- not until the Kennedy presidency did liberal academic influence upon American national affairs become particularly significant

- not until the feeling arose that President Johnson, having enlisted the support of the liberal academics in defeating the "warmongering" Barry Goldwater, had betrayed them by involving the United States ever more deeply in a widening Asian war did a strong feeling of outrage develop on many campuses.

Also it must be borne in mind the academic community is relatively safe from intimidation, and can afford to speak more freely than those answerable directly to the public (notably politicians).

Curiously enough, the unwillingness of the professors to be wildly daring in their protests has contributed to the effectiveness of the movement and produced an institution which can plausibly be considered an educational boon.

The origins of the first teach-in illustrate perfectly the cool, cautious courage which has made the movement so successful.

A fairly large group of professors at the University of Michigan, disgusted by developments in Viet-Nam, announced they planned to protest by cancelling classes for a day. A great roar of outrage immediately issued forth from the university administration and from the public. In vain did the professors protest they would make up the lost class-time later.

In the face of this opposition, the professors turned their original idea inside out. Instead of cancelling classes, they would teach all night long. And the subject of their after-hours lectures would be the Viet-Nam situation.

The university authorities, grateful for having been spared an unpleasant row, co-operated gladly. The students, their appetites whetted by all the fuss, turned up in great numbers. They stayed to hear, in many cases for the first time, the general case against American involvement in Viet-Nam and specific attacks on various aspects of the American war-effort.

All night the professors taught. It must indeed have seemed as exciting in its own way as the civil right sit-ins in the Deep South

