

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

A Tribute to Richard Ohmann

by Pam Annas, Susan O'Malley, and Bob Rosen



PHOTO OF RICHARD OHMANN

Richard Ohmann, founder and long-time editorial board member of *Radical Teacher*, died on October 8, 2021 at the age of 90. We are publishing this issue--a selection from his many writings for the journal--to honor his memory.

You can read about his long and distinguished career as an English professor at Wesleyan University, as editor of *College English*, and as the author of *English in America*, *Reading Culture*, and other influential works in his obituary in the *New York Times*.^{*} Our purpose in this brief introduction is to share with *Radical Teacher* readers what he has meant to the journal and to his fellow editorial board members for almost fifty years.

Dick published roughly four dozen articles in *Radical Teacher*, conceived and organized numerous special issues, was intensely involved in editing (and sometimes, when necessary, re-writing) submissions, and was essential to charting the direction of the journal over the years. But no less important than his intellectual contributions to our group has been his social contribution.

Dick's sly and irreverent humor and his skills as lunchtime quartermaster have gotten us through dozens of four-hour business meetings. Most valuable, though – for the mental health and cohesion of the group – were the yearly “farm meetings” that he hosted at his place in idyllic Hawley, Massachusetts. Together with his partner, our long-time art director, Liz Powell, he orchestrated weekends of festive eating (he was a terrific cook), walks in the woods, late night discussions of everything from politics to movies to relationships and back to politics, joke-telling marathons, and, yes, even business meetings. Without these annual weekends, we very well might have split or deflated or burned out like too many other radical groups.

So many people, on and off the board, who have shared their memories of Dick have spoken of his generosity – not only as a host and as a friend, but also as a mentor. If you had some writing you needed edited, if you had a project you wanted to brainstorm, if you needed a recommendation, if you were just stuck, Dick was there, cheerful and incredibly helpful. It's no exaggeration to say that some of us owe our careers to him. Dick's generosity and fierce intelligence also informed his teaching, as you will see in the teaching articles that we're including here, so it is no surprise that the *Radical Teacher* board includes some of his students.

Re-reading Dick's writings for *Radical Teacher* was a pleasure as well as an education. His ability to make complex and strenuous radical arguments in a style both casual and precise, charming and often intimate, is something many of us have envied and even tried to imitate. So deciding what to include and what to leave out was not easy.

The dozen pieces we are including range from his earliest to some quite recent, among them introductions, historical overviews, course descriptions, critiques of educational institutions (and of course of capitalism), a book review, a teaching note, and a comradely response to a letter expressing disappointment with his book *English in America*. At the end of this collection you'll also find transcripts of

tributes to Dick from a special session of the Modern Language Association in January of 2022.

We believe these writings will give you a good sense of what Dick Ohmann was like or, if you knew him, help you remember why you enjoyed and admired him so much. Unless you've been a fanatical reader of *Radical Teacher* since 1976, many of these will be new to you, and those you've seen before will surely reward another read. We hope you enjoy and learn from them; we certainly did.

* The obituary is at: <https://tinyurl.com/2p8urz25>. Ira Shor is finishing Dick's book on the College Wage Premium; it will be published by Johns Hopkins University Press.



teacher, Summer 1979

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