Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning
UCF
UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Teaching Squares at UCF

What is a Teaching Square?

Teaching squares offer faculty at any stage of their teaching career an opportunity to gain new insight into their own teaching through observation and self-reflection. Each Teaching Square consists of four faculty members from different disciplines who agree to visit each other's classes over the course of the semester and discuss what they've learned.

The purpose of Teaching Squares is NOT to evaluate the person being observed; it's to promote dialogue and self-reflection. The primary characteristic of teaching squares is discovery-learning by directly observing others' teaching and by holding conversations among the four members about their situational factors and their responses and strategies concerning those factors.

Theoretical Framework

The framework for teaching squares includes

1. Appreciative inquiry: discovering what works well in the learning environment and how,
2. Empathy and respect: demonstrating understanding and support for peers and students,
3. Team-based operations: faculty members contribute as both learners and teachers for the good of the team,
4. Non-evaluation: all outcomes refer to oneself in teaching squares rather than suggesting improvements to someone else.

How They Work

Members of the teaching square meet early in the semester to discuss expectations and logistics. Each member provides syllabi and other relevant course information to others in the square. Members visit one another's classes at least once and write up what they learned from the observations. Then they all meet over coffee (real or virtual!) and talk about the issues raised.

In summary, the schedule looks like this

Early Semester	Step 1: Square Introductions	Discuss expectations Create schedule
Early Semester	Step 2: Preparation for Observations	Provide each other materials Prepare for note-taking
Early and Mid-Semester	Step 3: Class Visits	Visit one class for each member Record observations

Late Semester	Step 4: Final Meeting	Review observations Write reflection Meet together to discuss

Step 1: Square Introductory Meeting

Schedule a meeting with all members of the square to create the visitation schedule. Here are logistics to consider in the first meeting, along with tables to help you with organization if you wish.

What do each of the members hope to get from the Teaching Square? Square members may come with specific issues about which they are interested in learning. Knowing those from the beginning can help you structure your experience in the way that's most effective for the group. They may also make a difference in which of each other's classes you choose to observe. Thus, you'll likely want to start your discussion with hearing why your colleagues chose to participate in a Teaching Square.

	Name	Goals
What do I hope to gain from the Square?		
Partner #1 Goals		
Partner #2 Goals		
Partner #3 Goals		

When should visits occur? Don't assume that a class in which you have a lot of student-centered work is a bad time to visit. In fact, if you have an especially successful student activity, that could be a great time for a colleague to observe. Remember, some people may actually be quite interested in learning about alternatives to lecturing. At the same time, if interactive lecturing in a large class is a strength of yours, that could also be a great time for a visit.

	Name	I visit class, day/time	When I'm visited, day/time
Partner #1			
Partner #2			
Partner #3			

How long should the observer stay? It's best to observe an entire class period. First, that lets you see potentially important opening and closing activities, but also because it can be disruptive to the class if you arrive late or leave early, unless you leave at a break between activities. If it's not possible to stay for the entire time, discuss with your colleague what would be a good point to arrive or depart.

When should you have the post-observation meeting? Toward the end of the semester meet with your Square members either remotely or in-person to share your reflections and any next steps for your teaching or your classes.

Step 2: Preparation for Observations

After you've arranged logistics for the term, it's time to prepare for the observations. This requires forethought on the part of both the observer and the person being observed.

When it comes to being observed, you'll need to think about:

What information should be provided ahead of time to the observer? It's helpful to have context when one is observing. You can exchange syllabi, provide copies of relevant course assignments. You might also provide information about the course itself (is it a required course in the major? major elective? general education course?) What are the prerequisites? Do students from a variety of majors take the course? And so on.

What should I tell my students about the observer(s)? Alert students in advance about the number of different faculty members who will attend on three different class sessions. Then, introduce the visitor(s) to the class on the day they attend.

For those doing the observing, you'll want to prepare for your observations. You'll want to think through:

Is there a specific lens through which I want to focus my observations? Going into observations with specific questions in mind can help you focus your attention. Some examples of lenses you might employ, though the list is by no means exhaustive, are listed in the table below.

Lens	Questions to Ask
Course Design	• To what extent do I summarize central points clearly and regularly?
Motivation	• How do I arouse curiosity in students? • How do I keep students engaged? • How do I leave students wanting to know more? • How do I show students I am interested in them as learners? • To what extent do I give some space to students to set the agenda?

Assessment	• How do I assess what my students already know? • How clearly tied are my assessments to student learning objectives? • How do I ensure that students perceive I am aware of issues of justice and fairness in my grading?
Teaching Strategies	• Is there variety in how I deliver material? • Do I model different ways of learning? • How effectively do I handle small group work? • Do my questions stimulate meaningful discussion? • How current and relevant are my examples?
Class Climate	• How knowledgeable am I about classroom demographics? • How do I adjust to differences among students? • How inclusive is my teaching practice? • How do I make the environment of the class warm and welcoming? • Do my students feel respected?

Is there an organizing framework I should use for my notes? Many ethnographic researchers find it useful to divide observational notes into descriptions and reflections. You might consider setting up an organizing framework that facilitates this for you, and thereby prepares you for the final discussion with your colleagues. Descriptions would include who, what, where, when, and how of class happenings. Reflections would answer questions about how relevant this is to your own teaching, what pedagogies and strategies were used, how this differs from your own teaching, what assumptions you bring, and how the activities make you feel. Here's an example of how that might go.

Time	Description	Reflection
11:30	RT greets students as they arrive. One S asks question about homework. RT says she will address that with entire class. First PowerPoint slide shows agenda for class session	Having the agenda posted seems like it is organized. I like that RT waited to answer the student question until the entire class was present. How does one decide when that is best?
11:35	RT pulls up a poll and asks students to respond to questions about the reading. She collects answers and addresses each individually, asking students to support answers. Invites students to suggest a bonus question. One student speaks up immediately and others laugh.	Ss seem to know this is coming. This must be a regular thing. It's interesting to let the students suggest a question. That means typing it in on the spot. Is that a good use of time? But students seem to like the interaction.
11:45	. . . .	. . . .

Step 3: Class Visits

Through mutual exchange of visits with Square partners, participants assume roles as both observer and observed, of teacher and student. They share the risks and reward of inviting colleagues into their classrooms. The following attitudes during observation will help the Teaching Squares function as designed:

- This is NOT an opportunity to improve someone else's teaching. Any hint of judgment can kill the climate.
- Enter each other's classrooms with respect for both the teacher and students in the class.
- Observers have no participatory role. You may greet the class if that seems appropriate; otherwise, you should remain silent and the teacher should not call on you for input.
- There is vulnerability in allowing people to come into one's class. Refrain from making any evaluative comments about what you see either within or outside of the Teaching Square, including with departmental colleagues, department chairs, or deans.
- As an observer, keep the focus on yourself and what you can learn from your colleague.

Step 4: Final Meeting

It's important at the final meeting to continue to remember that Teaching Squares are focused on self-reflection.

Where should we meet? We advise if you're meeting face-to-face that you do it somewhere off campus, or at least not in an office. Don't hesitate to schedule your meeting over coffee or even a meal. This is colleague-time! Remember, the Faculty Center will reimburse you for up to $50 in expenses. Enough for a latte and a pastry ©.

What should we discuss? This is the opportunity to consolidate your learning. Planning questions you'll discuss can help that happen. Here are some examples.

- What have you learned about your teaching philosophy from your classroom observations?
- What personal values and convictions do you bring to your teaching?
- How has the experience of being in the "learner" role impacted how you think about your teaching?
- What have you learned that is one of your teaching strengths?
- What aspects of your teaching would you wish to improve—and how might you do that?
- What surprised you about the experience? Were any of your assumptions challenged?
- What is one thing you learned that will make your own teaching more effective?

Is this the end? That's up to you. We're happy to facilitate another semester for your Teaching Square to continue, if you'd like, and of course you can continue to stay in touch with your colleagues informally. You are also welcome to reapply to be in another teaching square next semester, with a different set of colleagues.

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