

# Teaching Squares

## University of Calgary in Qatar



*Enhancing Teaching and Learning through observation and reflection*

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\* Adapted from Berenson, C. (2017). *Teaching Squares: Observe & Reflect on Teaching & Learning*. Taylor Institute Guide Series.

## What will I get out of the Teaching Squares experience?

Teaching Squares initiatives are designed to enhance teaching and learning and to build community through a process of reciprocal peer observation, self-reflection, and group discussion. Originally created by Anne Wessely from St. Louis Community College, variations on Teaching Squares are widely implemented throughout universities and colleges in North America and the UK. Teaching Squares initiatives facilitate the sharing of successful and innovative teaching methods and ideas, and contribute to fostering a campus culture of ongoing reflection and improvement in teaching practice (Moore & Moore, 2006).

By the end of the teaching squares experience, you should be able to:

- Observe, analyze, reflect on, and gain new insights into teaching and learning
- Increase your understanding and appreciation of the work of colleagues
- Gather ideas for developing your teaching and learning philosophy and ‘repertoire’
- Formulate a plan for trying out new approaches (adapted from The Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning, 2008; York Technical College, n.d.).

## Why might I want to be involved in a Teaching Squares initiative?

Postsecondary teaching is typically experienced as a private endeavour that takes place behind closed doors and before the eyes of students exclusively. This privatization of teaching (Palmer, 2007) can create an environment of isolation for individual instructors; it also inhibits the potential for the rich dialogue and learning that can arise in conversations about teaching and learning with colleagues (Roxa & Martensson, 2009). In a Teaching Squares scenario, isolation is interrupted as individuals observe their colleagues in action and subsequently reflect on and discuss their learning as part of a community of teachers.

Teaching Squares initiatives also contribute to raising the profile and status of teaching more broadly in university contexts, where research is often situated as the privileged academic activity. Shulman (1993) argues that teaching needs to be treated more like research – as public, community property – in order for it to be seen as scholarly activity. Gathering together to watch, analyze, critically discuss, review, and reflect on teaching in the context of a Teaching Square makes the complex and rigorous work of teaching and learning visible and communally relevant.

Participating in a Teaching Square can vitalize and energize your individual teaching practices and ideas. Your involvement can also contribute to more broadly positioning teaching as scholarly, social activity involving not only individual instructors and their students, but larger communities of colleagues (within and beyond disciplinary contexts).

## What makes Teaching Squares Unique?

Conventional peer observation teaching development programs emphasize the giving and receiving of critical, evaluative feedback among colleagues. These initiatives often focus their efforts on developing the skills of peer reviewers and much research converges around understanding and improving the nuances of peer observation and feedback processes (see for instance Bell & Cooper, 2013; Golparian, Chan & Cassidy, 2015; Hubball & Clarke, 2011; Yiend, Weller & Kinchin, 2014). The value and importance of peer critiques of teaching should not be underestimated as these models aim to hold teaching to rigorous, objective and transparent standards of evaluation (Bernstein & Edwards, 2001). However, critics of such approaches to improving teaching have concerns about the capacities of colleagues to judge the performance of their peers (Courneya, Pratt & Collins, 2008) and the ultimate effectiveness of critical evaluation as a tool for improving teaching (Thomas, 2001). The environment produced in peer evaluation approaches can be intimidating and less than conducive to open and honest exploration of teaching values and practices.

In contrast to traditional peer observation initiatives, Teaching Squares approaches involve reflecting on what can be learned about one's own teaching by observing colleagues. Rather than evaluating others, the Teaching Squares emphasis is on self-evaluation and reflection. Beginning with the work of Stephen Brookfield (1998), critical reflection has come to be recognized as an important tool for transforming and enhancing teaching practice. For Brookfield, critically reflective teaching entails coming to "see how we think and work through different lenses" (1998, p. xiii). By allowing individuals to be 'learners' again in their colleagues classes, Teaching Squares can provide unique lenses through which to reflect on and talk about teaching and learning (University of Waterloo, n.d.). There is also growing appreciation that reflective practice is, in and of itself, a skill to be developed and nurtured (Clegg, Tan & Saeidi, 2002; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005; Hubball, Collins & Pratt, 2005). The Teaching Squares experience aims to support and enhance both observation and critical reflection skills through offering numerous tools and templates to guide participants in these processes.

## Guiding Principles

In order to create a supportive, open, and energizing environment, these principles provide the foundations for Teaching Squares activities (adapted from North Virginia Community College CETL, 2015; Stonehill College CTL, 2008):

<b>Confidential reciprocity</b> Everyone observes and is observed / we all experience both the role of teacher and learner in a confidential environment	<b>Mutual respect</b> We enter the classroom respectful of instructors, students, and contextual differences
<b>Appreciation</b> We aim to identify and build upon practices that create effective environments for learning	<b>Self-referential reflection</b> We report what was learned from the observation to improve our own teaching rather than trying to improve a square partner's

*Figure 1. Teaching squares guiding principles*

## How will the Teaching Squares initiative work at UCQ?

Although Teaching Squares Programs can vary, a typical format involves four instructors who agree to visit each other's classes once over the course of a semester, and then meet to discuss what they have learned from their observations. Here at the University of Calgary in Qatar, instead of four instructors, and a Teaching Square, we will have a Teaching Triad. This would include at least two instructors and a Teaching and Learning Specialist from the Centre for Teaching and Learning in a triad. The triad can be expanded to include a third instructor making it into a teaching square.

# Teaching Triad Format



## **Classroom Observation/Discussion**

This entails a meeting or classroom observation with a Teaching and Learning Specialist to identify areas an instructor would like to enhance their teaching skills in. A debrief session will be held to articulate the areas to be enriched within the Teaching Square program (2 hours/1 hour debrief or 1 hour meeting).



## **Initial Meeting**

An initial meeting to meet the members of the Teaching Square or Triad to review the program (philosophy and logistics), set goals/expectations, and establish an observation schedule (30 minutes)



## **Prepare for observations**

Share and review course outlines and/or pertinent information to provide context for the observation, identify the observation focus, and select observation note-taking materials (approximately 20 minutes - 1 hour for each observation)



## **Classroom Visits**

Attend the agreed upon class and take observational notes (approximately 1 hour for each observation).



## **Debrief Session**

A brief opportunity for the observee to reflect on their teaching and for the observer to share preliminary observations (approximately 30 minutes for each observation). This session can also be held with the Teaching and Learning Specialist.



## **Reflections**

Write thoughts about your observations following each class visit and identify how you will apply learning in your classroom (approximately 30 minutes for each observation)



## **Wrap up square share meeting/observation (optional)**

Share with colleague(s) and the Teaching and Learning Specialist what you have learned about your own teaching from watching your colleague in action. Implement your plan, and have the Teaching and Learning Specialist observe (optional) and provide feedback to you.

# Guidelines

## 1. Initial square gathering

Along with reviewing the Teaching Squares philosophy and method, the following templates will help you get oriented and organized.

### 1.1 Who are my teaching square partners?

Name	Email	Phone

### 1.2 Setting Expectations: What do we hope to gain from this experience?

Taking the time to clarify this question at the start and revisiting it throughout the program will help you to get the most out of your teaching square and be a better square participant. You can use the following chart to record your own and your colleagues' goals for the square (optional).

What are my goals for the program? What do I hope to gain from the 'square'?	
Partner #1's goals: Name:	
Partner #2's goals: Name:	

### 1.3 Setting up a schedule: When will we visit each other's classes?

It is ideal to establish the visiting schedule at the initial square meeting while all members of the group are together. As an observee, you will want to avoid scheduling visits on particular days (such as during scheduled exams), but try not to over-orchestrate the observation schedule according to your teaching plans. For instance, if you have a group activity planned for a given session you might decide that you are not really 'teaching', however, there is plenty to observe as the activity is set up and the students subsequently participate in it. It is valuable for observers to get a chance to see a range of approaches and activities – any opportunity to see how students are learning is useful from an observer perspective.

Name	When I'm Visiting (Day, Time, Location)	What am I observing?	What would be observed (Day, Time, Location)	What would be observed

(Make sure that components of this table are aligned with your goals for participating in the square)

## 2. Prepare for observations

### 2.1 Considerations for observee: Provide context

Getting a sense of the 'big picture' of a course can make it easier to understand what's going on in a single class and thus can lead to a more meaningful observation experience. You might want to exchange course outlines, relevant assignments and texts with your square partner(s). By discussing the following questions (adapted from Northern Virginia Community College CETL, 2015; Stonehill College CTL, 2008) you can also give visitors that sense of the big picture:

- What are your main goals for the course?
- What purpose does the course serve in the major or the general curriculum?



- Why do students take this course?
- How would you characterize your students this semester? Are they a typical group?
- How often have you taught this course before?
- What are your goals for the day your colleague is coming to visit?
- Are you trying anything new this semester?

## 2.2 Considerations for observer: Choose a focus

There's a lot going on in any class and it can be a challenge to keep track of it all without a plan going in. One approach is to choose a particular focus through which to approach your observations. Going into a class with some specific questions in mind can help you orient your attention and lead to a more meaningful observation. As an observer, it is advisable to reflect on your own teaching development and what you would like to work on in choosing an observation focus.

Here are some examples, though there are many more possibilities. Keep in mind that your observation goal is not to provide feedback, but rather to collect data that you can subsequently reflect on in terms of your own teaching. For example, if you are interested in issues of student engagement, you will observe and take note of the various ways in which engagement occurs and is cultivated in the observee's classroom.

The guiding questions to follow (adapted from Northern Virginia Community College CETL, 2015; Stonehill College CTL, 2008; Vanderbilt Center for Teaching, n.d.) provide ideas for thinking about your observation priorities ahead of time.

An example could be a focus on student engagement

- When do the students seem most engaged in the material? When do they seem the least engaged?
- How do I know the students are engaged?
- What is specifically going on when engagement is happening? What are the students doing? What is the instructor doing?
- How is the class organized and paced? How does this affect student engagement?
- What are the patterns of conversation? Who holds the 'conversational ball'? Is it student-to-student, student-to-instructor, the same students again and again?
- How does the instructor use verbal and non-verbal communication?

Another example could be a focus on instructional strategies

- What are the different instructional strategies used in this class? (presentation/lecture, discussion, etc.)
- Do some strategies seem to work better for the students than others? Why is this the case? What seems to make the difference here?
- How does the teacher use classroom media (digital technologies, slides, video, music, etc.) and/or space?
- Are there any seemingly unexpected moments in the class? How are they handled?
- Are questions used as a teaching strategy? If so, what kinds of questions does the teacher ask, and when? How are the students involved in asking and answering questions? How is the instructor involved in asking and answering questions?
- Are small groups used in the class? If so, when and how are they implemented? What impact do they appear to have on student learning?
- Which instructional strategies seem more engaging for the students? Which strategies allow them to participate in higher order thinking (such as self-reflection, application, critical thinking)?

### 3.1 How long should I stay?

Although class lengths can vary considerably, observing an entire class typically offers the best and least disruptive experience for you, your square partner, and the students. If scheduling conflicts do not permit watching the whole session, discuss with your square partner the least disruptive means of joining and leaving the class. Staying for at least 50 minutes is advisable.

### 3.2 How should I introduce my square partner to students?

If you anticipate students noticing and/or being curious about a visitor's presence in the classroom, it is reasonable to introduce your square partner and to explain the purpose for her/his visit. Most students are impressed to learn that their instructor is participating in a project to improve teaching and learning. Whether you introduce the visitor or not is a matter of individual preference and might best be discussed with your square partner prior to the start of class.

### 3.3 What is my role when I visit?

Although the urge to participate in an engaging class can be strong, participants find that they best fulfill their teaching squares goals by restricting themselves to the role of observer.

Recording your observations of the activities of both the teacher and the students involves considerable focus and attention.

### 3.4 How do I record my observations?

There are many ways to organize your classroom observation notes. Using the templates for recording classroom observations and preliminary reflections can be helpful.

You might alter the headings on this form to align with the observation focus that you have identified.

Course & Instructor	Class Topic/objective	Date
Describe the academic setting (lecture/lab, learning space, class size, student characteristics, learning environment, etc.):		
Describe how the instructor and students began and ended the class:		
Describe learning activities that took place during the class:		
Describe instructional tools and/or teaching strategies that were used by the instructor:		
What tips did you pick up on classroom management?		
What did you observe that you'd like to incorporate into your classes?		

Adapted from Northern Virginia Community College CETL (2015). The Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning: Teaching Squares.

#### 4. Optional debrief meeting

Some participants appreciate an opportunity to briefly debrief the classroom observation once it has occurred. This optional meeting can provide a chance to have a preliminary one-on-one talk about the observation experience. The debrief discussion is intended to facilitate reflection on the part of both the observer and observee, and can be guided by a series of questions designed with this in mind. The observer's role is to share their observations and learnings rather than to provide directive feedback. This meeting is entirely optional and can also be held with the Teaching and Learning Specialist.

Guiding Questions that could be used include:

- How do you feel about how the session went? What's your sense of how the class was for the students?
- What strategies did you use to enhance student learning?
- What do you think worked particularly well? What was the highlight for you? For the students?
- Is there anything that you feel did not work well? Is there something you would do differently next time you teach this class? If yes, what would you change and why?
- Is there anything that did not go as planned? Did this turn out to be positive or challenging for you? What about for the students?
- Did the students get 'it' in the end? Do you think they learned what you hoped they'd learn in the class? How do you know?
- As an observer, here are some strategies I observed that you used to enhance student learning. Here is how I have grown (what I have learned) because of watching you teach.
- Reflective questions such as, "One of the teaching struggles I face is [engaging my students']. How do you deal with this problem? What did you do during today's class to engage students?"
- Pragmatic questions such as, "How did you prepare for this session? "What are some of the choices you made as you prepared for this class?"

## 5. Reflections

Below are templates for your use when reflecting on your observations of your square partner's work. You will find the templates useful for collecting your thoughts and reflecting following a classroom observation. You might also find that your recording/reflecting method shifts over the course of the program as you gain experience. Feel free to choose from any of the templates provided or to develop something of your own. When complete, these documents are for your reference only, and merely intended to help guide your observations and reflective processes.

### 5.1 What? So What? Now What?

Rolfe et al. (2001) provide a framework that can be useful for documenting your observations and reflections. Here three simple questions help you record and track your learning experiences. You might use this template after class when you can take some time to pull out your most important observations and then reflect on their relevance and implications for your future teaching.

<b>What?</b>	<b>So What?</b>	<b>Now What?</b>
<i>What did you observe during the class? What stood out or took you by surprise? What exactly happened? What did the instructor and students do? Be as specific as possible.</i>	<i>What is the relevance of this observation for you? Why does it stand out? What makes it important? What have you learned?</i>	<i>How does this observation connect to your teaching practice? How can you apply what you've learned in your current or future teaching? Is there something you will try or change as a result of this observation? What is your plan?</i>

## 5.2 Teaching squares reflections: Immediate and follow-up

<b>Immediately following Visit</b>
<i>Examples of good teaching and learning practice I've seen in this session.</i>
<i>What I have learned from observing this session.</i>
<i>Things I might try out as a result of observing this session.</i>
<b>Follow-Up Reflection after my own teaching</b>
<i>Things I have tried since observing the session.</i>
<i>What worked well (including details of learner response).</i>
<i>What I might do differently.</i>

Adapted from The Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning (QIA) (2008). Teaching and Learning Programme: Teaching Squares.

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