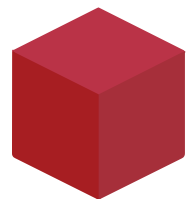
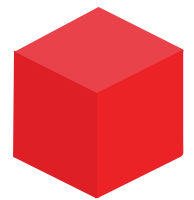
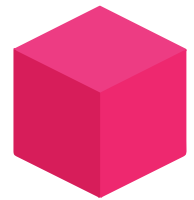
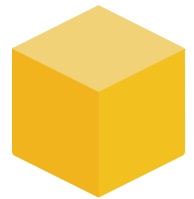


# TEACHING SQUARES

OPENCoLab  
OPEN LEARNING & TEACHING COLLABORATIVE  
PLYMOUTH STATE UNIVERSITY

OBSERVE &  
REFLECT  
*on*  
TEACHING &  
LEARNING



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

Teaching Squares 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. 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

## **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).

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; 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). There is also growing appreciation that reflective practice is itself, a skill to be developed and nurtured. 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

<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 teaching

## Time Commitment (8.5 hrs) & Process



### 1. Initial square gathering

Meet colleagues, review the program (philosophy and logistics), set goals/expectations, and establish an observation schedule (1.5 hours)



### 2. Prepare for observations

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



### 3. Classroom Visits

Attend the agreed upon class and take observational notes (approximately 1 hour for each observation -- 3 hours)



### 4. Reflections

Write thoughts about observations following each class visit and in preparation for final meeting (approximately 30 mins for each observation -- 1.5 hours)



### 5. Wrap up square share meeting

Share with colleagues what you have learned about your own teaching from watching them in action, and make a plan for implementing changes accordingly (1.5 hours)

# 1. Initial square gathering

*These are your Teaching Squares partners!*

Name	Email	Phone (optional)

*These are your CoLab partners!*

Name	Email
CoLab Staff:	
CoSA:	

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

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:	
Partner #3's goals: Name:	

**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.

*When am I visiting my partners' classes?*

Partner's Name	Course name(s) / #	Day / time	Location

*When am I being visited?*

Visitor	My Course Name	When I'm being visited (Day, time)
CoLab Staff:		
CoSA:		

## 2. Prepare for observations

### 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 partners. By discussing the following questions 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 education 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?

### 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.

### 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?

### Content

- What do the students already know about the content of today's class?

- Are the students curious about the content? How is the content made relevant to the students? How is this done explicitly? How is it done implicitly?
- How do the students know what's important in today's class? What activities or practices do the teacher or students undertake to make what matters most evident?
- What happens to help students learn the material? What are the various approaches used to convey the content?
- Did students get it? How do I know? How do students know? How does the instructor know?

## **Diversity**

- How would diversity be described in this classroom – what are the visible classroom demographics?
- How are differences in learners accommodated? What are the activities or approaches applied here that might help different learners?
- Is there anything about the content of today's class that reflects a diversity of perspectives?
- What are the different approaches that are used to make the classroom an inclusive place? How are different students encouraged to participate?
- What else is noteworthy in terms of diversity and inclusion in this setting?

## **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)?

## **Classroom climate**

- What is the mood before class begins? During class? After class?
- How is the classroom arranged physically and how does this influence teaching and learning?
- What kind of rapport exists between teacher and student(s) or among students?

- What kinds of things does the instructor do to address the environment in this class?
- What are the students doing to contribute to the classroom environment?

### **3. Classroom visits**

#### **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.

#### **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.

#### **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 square's 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.

#### **How do I record my observations?**

There are many ways to organize your classroom observation notes. Two templates for recording classroom observations and preliminary reflections are provided on the following pages. Feel free to use or to alter these templates as you see fit.



*Template 1: Double-entry observation notes*

Some people find it helpful to organize their observation notes by dividing them into *descriptions* and *reflections*. The description can reflect the instructor's actions, students' reactions, and the content being conveyed, while your reflections can track your own reactions to what's happening in class. Reflections can be recorded both during class and afterwards. Occasionally, marking down the time as you go can also help you get a sense of how long particular segments of the class take.

Time	Description of what's happening	Personal reflections

*Template 2: Observation Questions*

(You could also alter the headings on this form to align with your observation focus if you have chosen one.)

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?		

## 4. Reflections

Here are two templates you can use to guide your follow-up reflection. Feel free to choose either or develop something of your own.

### *Reflection Template 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>

Adapted from Rolfe, G., Freshwater, D. & Jasper, M. (2001). *Critical reflection for nursing and the helping professions: A user's guide*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Reflection Template 2: 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 reflections 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*.

## 5. Wrap-up square share meeting

Once classroom observations and subsequent reflections are complete, program participants come together for a final meeting to share what they have learned throughout the process. You can decide as a group what is most helpful for you to discuss in this final meeting. **However, in keeping with the philosophy of the Teaching Squares Program, it is advisable to keep the conversation focused on self-reflection rather than critique or advice-giving.** This final meeting ultimately provides an opportunity to consolidate your thoughts and learnings from the program, to honor and appreciate your colleagues, and to think about how the Teaching Squares experience might shape your future teaching and learning practice.

Here are some questions that you can reflect on in preparation for the final wrap up discussion:

- What have you learned about your teaching philosophy from your classroom observations (this could be something new or something that has been affirmed)? What personal values do you bring to your teaching?
  - How has the experience of being in the ‘learner’ role impacted your teaching?
  - What have you learned is one of your teaching strengths?
  - What aspect of your teaching do you wish to improve? How are you going to do this?
  - What surprised you during this experience? What assumptions about teaching were challenged by what you observed?
  - What is one thing you learned that will make your teaching more effective?
  - What is one thing you learned that you are going to apply next semester in the classroom?
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### Open Learning & Teaching Collaborative

Plymouth State University

<https://colab.plymouthcreate.net/>



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***<http://www.ucalgary.ca/taylorinstitute/guides>***

*Cover design adapted from Ykje Piera, MEdes, PhD Student EVDS, Learning Technologies Specialist, EducationalDevelopment Unit, Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning*

**Full list of references for this guide available at <https://bit.ly/TSrefs>.**