

The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

Teaching Squares



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Welcome to CETL's Teaching Squares Program

Thank you for participating in CETL's Teaching Squares program! You will experience a renewed enthusiasm for teaching and an increased appreciation of the excellent work of your colleagues and the potential of your students.

Teaching Squares will provide you opportunities to observe, analyze, and celebrate good teaching, to relive the joy and confusion of being a student, and to formulate plans for enhancing your own teaching based on your observations and reflections and the shared reflections of your Square partners.

CETL's program is modeled after successful programs at other institutions, particularly Stonehill College, Stetson College, St. Louis Community College and Leeward Community College. This manual has been adapted from theirs and contains some things that are direct copies. Credit should accrue to these institutions.

CETL honors your willingness to open your classroom, or your online course, and share your expertise with your colleagues. Our experience has shown us that this will result in a renewed enthusiasm for teaching and an increased appreciation of the excellent work of our colleagues. We know it can sometimes feel risky to invite colleagues into our classes, and we applaud your willingness to take that risk. We are excited about this program and grateful to have an enthusiastic group of colleagues to help get it rolling. Thank You.

Teaching Squares: An Overview

The CETL Teaching Squares Program allows faculty to gain new perspectives and insights into their teaching through a completely non-evaluative process. It works through a process of reciprocal classroom observation and self-reflection.

Each Teaching Square consists of four faculty members, preferably from different disciplines, who work together for a semester. These faculty visit each other's classes and then meet and discuss, through a guided process, what they've learned from the observations.

What is the commitment?

- One Kick-Off event. This event is for all participants to understand and orient to the program, and to review the Teaching Squares Manual.
- One Squares Introduction: This is an initial meeting with your Teaching Square to arrange the program for that square. Participants should provide a syllabus and other appropriate materials for their course.
- Reciprocal Observations. Visit one another's classroom at least once.
- Self-Referential Reflection. Each square partner completes, by him or herself, several reflective questions about the observations. They are not necessarily shared at the Square Share.
- Square Share: This consists of one or two follow up meetings once all the observations are completed.
- All Squares Round-up. This is a final social event and roundtable to discuss the project. Because scheduling is difficult for all participants, this may or may not occur. It will be held on a Monday afternoon if it does. There is no obligation to participate.

Who can participate?

All NOVA Faculty – full-time and part-time – are welcome to participate. Squares are most successful when they consist of faculty with various levels of experience from a range of disciplines. You will most likely be grouped with instructors from different disciplines and divisions.

The Cornerstones of Teaching Squares

Teaching Squares look at reciprocity and shared responsibility, appreciation, self-referential reflections and mutual respect as the four cornerstones of a teaching square. These are the attitudes that, when exhibited by all members of a Square, result in a safe, supporting and energizing environment for sharing the joys of teaching!

Reciprocity and Shared Responsibility	Appreciation
Self-referential Reflections	Mutual Respect

Reciprocity and Shared Responsibility

As each member of a teaching square visits another square participant and or is visited, each assumes the dual roles of observer and the observed, teacher and student. Each experiences the opportunities and risks of inviting others into their classrooms.

Teaching Squares participants jointly assume the tasks of arranging classroom visits and exchanging course information. By fully participating in the organization and administration of the Square, they minimize the effort that must be expended by any single participant, thus maximizing a climate of collegiality. This is a team effort and a team result.

Self-Referential Reflection

The Square Share in an opportunity to report what you have learned from the observation experience. It is NOT an opportunity to improve a Square Partner's teaching. You keep your observations self-focused to avoid any indication of evaluation or judgment that might lead to defensiveness or suspicion.

Appreciation

The Square Share session is an opportunity to identify and celebrate the behaviors and practices that create a productive environment of learning. Expressing observations in a positive way energizes your Square Partner and helps you and him/her form new goals.

Mutual Respect

Participants enter their Square Partner's classroom with an attitude of empathy and respect for both the instructor and the students. It is necessary to recognize that different methods and techniques are required in different disciplines and class room situations.

The Teaching Squares Program

Suggested Schedule—each square can modify within the first and last dates:

When	What	Particulars
Fall- 1 st Week Oct	All Square Kickoff	Meet with your Square Partners and overview the Teaching Squares Project
Spring-1 st Week Feb		
Fall -2 nd Week Oct	Square Introductions	Meet with your square to discuss expectations, plan a preliminary schedule, and confer with your CETL Faculty Associate.
Spring-2 nd Week Feb		
Fall 3 rd Week Oct	Finalize schedule and exchange materials.	Confirm your visit times and pass on course materials to your square partners. You should provide course materials (syllabus, etc.) to your Square Partners. Prepare for good class visits.
Spring-3 rd Week Feb		
Fall 1 st -3 rd Week Nov	Class Visits	Visit at least one class of each of your square partners and record what you observe
Spring-1 st -1 st Week March- Apr		
Fall 4 th Week Nov.	Self-Reflection	Reflect on your notes in preparation for the Square Share
Spring 2 nd Week Apr		
Fall 1 st Week Dec	Square Share	Meet (over a meal?) with your Square to share your reflections
Spring 3 rd Week Apr		
Fall 2 nd Week Dec.	All-Square Round Up	
Spring 4 th Week Apr		

All Square Kickoff

The CETL Squares Kickoff is primarily a chance to review the program and ask questions. After this meeting you'll be asked to make a firm commitment. The success of the Square depends on everyone fully participating. If you are unable to attend be sure to discuss the manual with your Square facilitator.

Squares Introduction

The "Square Introduction" meeting is a time for your Square to establish some guidelines for how you'd like your square experience to unfold. Most important to this discussion is clarifying group members' expectations and roles, so there are fewer surprises later on. Please decide which member of your square will act as a liaison with your CETL faculty Associate, or with CETL.

What do you hope to gain from this experience?

Knowing what you hope to gain from this experience is important to clarify and is the central point of this meeting. Be aware of your own and your Square partners' goals. This will help you be a better square participant and will set the stage for your own reflection on your experience after the observations. The following Chart might be helpful for this meeting:

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

Getting a concept of the “big picture” of a course can make it easier to make sense of what’s happening in a class and thus can lead to a more meaningful observation experience. The Squares Introduction is the time to exchange syllabi with your square partners, as well as copies of relevant course assignments and texts. You might also consider filling your colleagues in on some of the following questions:

- What are your main goals for this course?
- What purpose does it 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? If not, what’s different about them?
- How often have you taught this course before?

- What does a typical day look like for this course?
- What are your goals for the day your colleague is coming to visit?
- Are you trying anything new this semester?

Schedule your visits at this meeting since it is easiest when everyone is together. But be flexible as the time approaches the course schedule may have changed. Don't fall into the trap of assuming that a class day that involves a lot of student-centered work (small group activities, etc.) is a day when you're "not teaching" and so is not an interesting day to be observed. Many people sign up for Teaching Squares because of an interest in learning about alternatives to lecturing – and in observing how people get students involved – so don't let a lack of traditional "teaching" (e.g. lecturing) on a particular day scare you off from inviting someone in to visit.

	Name	When I'm visiting Class, Day, time, location	When I'm being visited Day, time, location
Square Partner #1			
Square Partner #2			
Square Partner #3			

Here are some other questions you might want to ask at your Squares Introduction meeting:

How long should I stay?

- Class times can vary considerably. Observing an entire class session from start to finish typically offers the best (and least disruptive) experience for you, your Square Partner, and the students. If scheduling conflicts do not allow you to stay for an entire class, discuss with your Square Partner the least disruptive means of joining and leaving the class.

What is my role when I visit: observer or class participant?

- The urge to participate in class activities can be nearly irresistible. It is so easy to be swept up in the joy of being a student again and to forget that the purpose of the class visit is to observe your Square Partner's work. Previous participants have found that they could best fulfill their Teaching Squares goals by restricting themselves to the role of observer. With your Square Partner's consent you can always visit the class again as a participant!

How should I introduce my Square Partner to students?

- Most students are very curious about the presence of a visitor in the classroom. Participants report that most students are very impressed to learn that their instructor is participating in a project to improve teaching and learning.

When should we meet up again?

- Although the wrap-up “Square Share” is a month or two down the road, getting it scheduled now will help you find a mutually agreeable time. You are encouraged to meet in a comfortable location away from campus – perhaps over a pot luck or restaurant meal. Note the details here: _____

Class Visits

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. You should also be aware that your experience will depend on your own style as an instructor and as a student. Please give some thought to the following suggestion for prioritizing and organizing your visits.

It may be useful to choose a particular “lens” through which to focus your observations. Going in with some specific questions in mind can help you focus your attention and lead to a more meaningful observation. Here are some possible lenses, though there are dozens more possibilities:

Motivation

- How do I arouse curiosity in my students?
- How do I keep my students engaged in the material?
- When my class ends, do students leave wanting to know more?
- How do I show my learners I am interested in them?

Content

- Do I survey my learners to assess what they already know?
- Do I summarize my central points clearly?
- Do I give some space to my students to set the agenda?
- Are my examples relevant and current?

Diversity

- Am I knowledgeable of my classroom demographics? How do I accommodate differences in my learners?
- How do I ensure my curriculum addresses diversity?
- How inclusive am I in my teaching practice?

Instructional Strategies

- Is there variety in the way I deliver material?
- How can I encourage self-reflection and critical thinking?
- How effectively do I handle small group work?
- How do I handle unexpected moments in the classroom?
- Do I model different learning processes?
- Do my questions generate meaningful discussion?

Classroom climate

- Do my students feel respected?

- Do my students feel comfortable asking and answering questions?
- Do I set clear parameters for participation?
- Can my students challenge my position on an issue?

You may wish to take notes about your visit. You will find the following forms, suggestions and examples helpful but you should feel free to observe as you wish.

“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.

Double – entry notes might look like this: (I = instructor; S = student)

Time	Description of What’s Happening	Personal Reflections
11:25	I greets Ss as they come in. One S asks a question about homework – I says she’ll address that in class. An agenda has already been written on the board	I like the easy rapport with the students – seems organized with agenda already on board. Impressed that she held off answering Ss questions. I think sometimes I jump in too quickly with an answer
11:30	I closes the door and says “reading Quiz”. Ss put away books and get out paper. I reads through 5 questions, waits about 90 secs between each. Invites Ss to suggest a bonus question. S7 speaks up immediately Ss laugh	Ss seem to know what’s coming – must be a regular thing. Interesting to let Ss help write the quiz – what happens if someone suggests a bad question? But Ss sure like this
11:36	2 Ss come in late – don’t get out paper but sit there while I reads through the Qs one more time. After a minute I calls ‘time’ and Ss pass up papers	OK – definitely a regular thing – they know what to do and that they can’t take the quiz if late. She must be really clear about her expectations. I wonder how Ss feel about that – they don’t seem frustrated. Maybe I should try this.
11:40	I points to the agenda and elaborates on what they’re doing. Asks if anything else should be included.	I get why the agenda is helpful but as a Students, I used to feel that too detailed an agenda hampered spontaneity in a class. So I haven’t used them. Though a lot of that depends on how strict the I sticks to it. I like that she asked for input. I could do more of that.

Double entry notes are often used in conjunction with classroom discussion maps.

Another Sample Class Observation Form

Course & Instructor:	Class topic/objective:	Date:
Describe the academic setting (lecture/ lab/ required/ elective, class size, student characteristics, etc.):		
Describe how the instructor began and ended the class:		
Describe instructional strategies that enhanced the class (include student/instructor engagement, student/ student engagement, activities, etc.):		
Describe instructional tools used by the instructor (Internet, Power Point, physical demonstrations, etc.)		
What tips did you pick up on classroom management?		
What did you observe that you'd like to incorporate into your classes?		
Comments?		

Self-Reflection:

This is a personal experience for you. Your personal success in the Teaching Squares program depends on this. You may wish to share it at the square share, but there's no requirement to do so.

The following are some suggestions of questions that might help you.

- What have I learned about my teaching philosophy from my classroom observations (it could be something new or something that has been affirmed)? What personal values do I bring to my teaching?
- Has my teaching philosophy changed as a result of this experience?
- How has the experience of again being in the “learner” role impacted my teaching?
- What surprised me during this experience?
- What challenged me during this experience? What assumptions about teaching did I confront?
- What have I learned is one of my teaching strengths?
- What aspect of my teaching do I wish to improve? How am I going to do this?
- What is one thing I learned that will make my teaching more effective?
- Did I learn any tips, tricks or best practices that I might want to incorporate in my teaching?
- Is there one particular thing I learned that I will apply next semester in my classroom?
Why was this one thing so impressive?

You will gain the most if you write your reflections and allow each reflection to lead to other thoughts about your own teaching. Again, there is no requirement to share this beyond what you wish to do.

Square Share

The Teaching Squares experience offers you the opportunity to improve your own teaching by observing your Square Partners in an actual classroom situation. The focus is on self-reflection. It is NOT an invitation to offer feedback to improve your Partners' teaching. You should not offer opinions (negative or positive) about your observations nor ask for those opinions from others. Experience has indicated that this may create a judgmental climate and undermines the trust necessary to the successes of your Teaching Squares experience.

You are invited to return to the Cornerstones of Teaching squares before attending the meeting.

Each group can decide for itself what kind of conversation will be the most useful to them. Regardless of format, please resist the academic tendency to 'leave no criticism behind!'

Here are some questions that will help you shape your feedback to be reflective:

1. What are some specific things you liked about the project?
2. What are your suggestions for improving the project?
3. How did your participate in Teaching Squares give you a greater appreciation of
 - a. Our students
 - b. Our colleagues
 - c. Northern Virginia Community College
 - d. The teaching profession
4. What did you observe that might make your own teaching more effective?
5. Is there anything from your personal reflections that you'd like to share?

All-Squares Roundup

Primarily a social event to let all the Squares participants meet with one another at the end of the semester and discuss the experience.

Thank you for participating in the CETL Teaching Squares Project!