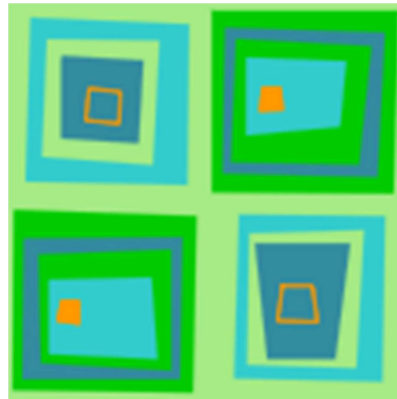


TEACHING SQUARES

GUIDELINES FOR PARTICIPANTS



STETSON UNIVERSITY

OFFICE OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

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--Karen Kaivola, Associate Provost for Faculty Development

Teaching Squares: An Overview

The teaching squares project offers faculty at any stage in their career an opportunity to gain new insight into their own teaching through a non-evaluative process of reciprocal classroom observation and self-reflection. The four faculty in each “square” agree to visit one another’s classes over the course of a semester and then to meet to discuss what they’ve learned. The purpose of a Teaching Square is to open up new spaces for reflection and conversation about teaching.

How do Teaching Squares Work?

Teaching Square members commit to attending an initial meeting early in the semester to discuss expectations and logistics, to visiting one another’s classes as least once, and then meeting again once all observations are complete to discuss what they’ve learned. Each member provides syllabi and other relevant course information to others in the Square. Each group determines its own schedule, which might look something like this:

Week 5	Square Introductions	Meet with members of your Square to discuss expectations and to plan a preliminary schedule.
Week 6	Exchange Materials	Confirm class visit times and provide any relevant course materials (syllabus, etc) to your Square partners.
Weeks 7-10	Class Visits	Visit one class of each of your square partners and record what you observe.
Weeks 11-12	Self-reflection	Review your notes; consider what you’ve learned about your own teaching.
Week 13-15	Final Meeting	Meet with your Square to share reflections. If you want to meet over lunch or dinner, Academic Affairs will reimburse each square for expenditures up to \$100.

Who Can Participate? How are Squares Assigned?

All Stetson faculty, full-time and part-time, are welcome to participate. Squares are most successful when they consist of various levels of experience from a range of disciplines. We also want to keep Teaching Squares entirely separate from the kind of teaching observation and review that goes on within departments as part of the tenure and promotion process (and other forms of evaluative review). Every effort will be made to compose Squares that reflect disciplinary diversity. Members of the same department will not be assigned to the same Square.

How is this a “non-evaluative” process?

Teaching Squares are intended to promote self-reflection about one’s own teaching rather than peer evaluation. Participants thus focus their conversations on what they’ve learned about their own teaching and avoid direct commentary on colleagues’ performance. The goal is to open our classrooms to one another while preserving a respectful and mutually-supportive experience for all involved. Participants are encouraged to approach the experience in a spirit of appreciation—even celebration—of the work of their colleagues.

The Cornerstones of Successful Teaching Squares

<p>RECIPROCITY AND SHARED RESPONSIBILITY Through mutual exchange of visits with Square partners, participants assume roles as both observer and observed, teacher and student. They simultaneously share the risks and rewards of inviting colleagues into their classrooms. Participants jointly assume the tasks of arranging visits and sharing information, thus minimizing the effort for any single participant and fostering a spirit of collegiality.</p>	<p>SELF-REFERENTIAL REFLECTION The final group discussion is an opportunity to share what you have learned. It is NOT an opportunity to improve anyone else’s teaching. By keeping the observations focused on oneself, participants avoid any hint of evaluation or judgment that could contribute to a climate of defensiveness or suspicion.</p>
<p>APPRECIATION The final group meeting is an opportunity to identify and affirm the behaviors and practices that enhance student learning across disciplines. It thus provides a way of articulating goals for all participants to pursue, in a supportive and collaborative way.</p>	<p>MUTUAL RESPECT Participants agree to enter colleagues’ classrooms with an attitude of respect for both the instructor and the student, recognizing that various methods and techniques work for different people, in different disciplines, and in specific classroom situations. Participants demonstrate respect by not making evaluative comments to others within—or outside—the Square.</p>

Logistics

The initial meeting is a chance for the group to establish guidelines on how they’d like the experience to unfold. Here are some ideas for what the group might want to discuss at this meeting (be sure to bring at least one copy of your syllabus to consult; you might want to bring copies for others as well):

When should I visit? Don’t assume that a class that involves a lot of student-centered work is a day when you’re “not teaching” and thus shouldn’t be observed. Many people who have signed up for Teaching Squares at other schools have done so because of an interest in learning about alternatives to lecturing—and an interest in seeing how others get students productively involved in group work—so don’t let a lack of “traditional teaching” on a given day keep you from offering that day as a possibility.

How long should I stay? Usually, it's best to observe the entire class if you can. It's also less disruptive to the students, unless a break is built in to a longer class session. If scheduling conflicts do not allow you to stay for an entire class, discuss with your Square partner the least disruptive way of joining (or leaving) the class—and try to find a time when you can stay for at least 45 minutes.

What is my role when I visit? The urge to participate in class activities or discussion can be nearly irresistible. It's easy to get caught up in the joy of being a student again and to forget that the purpose of the visit is to observe your colleague's work. It's easiest to do that well if you restrict yourself to the role of observer.

What kind of context should I provide about my class? Getting some sense of the “big picture” of a course can make it easier to understand what's happening in a class and thus can lead to a more meaningful observation. In addition to exchanging syllabi, you might provide copies of relevant course assignments and (short) texts. You might also consider filling your colleagues in on your course goals, the purpose of the course in the curriculum, why students take the course, how you'd describe the students (Are they typical? Distinctive in some way?), how often you've taught the course, whether you're trying anything new, and what your goals are for the particular day.

What should I tell my students? Most students will be curious about the presence of a visitor, so you might want to alert the students in advance that you're participating in a Teaching Square and the class will be visited on three different occasions by three different colleagues. Then, introduce the visitor to the class on the days they attend.

When should we meet up again? Although the wrap-up meeting may be a month or two down the road, getting it scheduled early will increase your odds of finding a mutually agreeable time. Ideally, you'll meet in a comfortable place away from campus—perhaps over a meal—and the Office of Academic Affairs is happy to cover the cost (up to \$100 of expenditures for the group) for lunch or dinner.

Preparing for a Good Visit

There's always a lot going on in any class, and it will be a challenge to keep track of all (or most!) of it without a plan going in. The next few pages offer several options for giving some shape to your observation experience: choosing a lens, “double-entry” observation notes, and discussion mapping.

I. Choosing a Lens

One approach that has worked for some people is to choose a particular “lens” through which to focus your observation. Going in with some specific question in mind can help focus your attention and lead to a more meaningful observation and subsequent reflection. Remember, ultimately the observation is intended to stimulate personal reflections about your own teaching. Here are some possible lenses, but the list is certainly not meant to be exhaustive:

Motivation

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

Content

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

Diversity

- Am I knowledgeable about my classroom demographics?
- How do I adjust to differences among my students?
- How do I ensure that my curriculum addresses diversity?
- How inclusive is my teaching practice?
- Do I treat different demographic groups of students differently?

Instructional Strategies

- Is there variety in how I deliver material or introduce ideas?
- How do 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 ways of learning?
- Do my questions stimulate meaningful discussion?

Classroom Climate

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

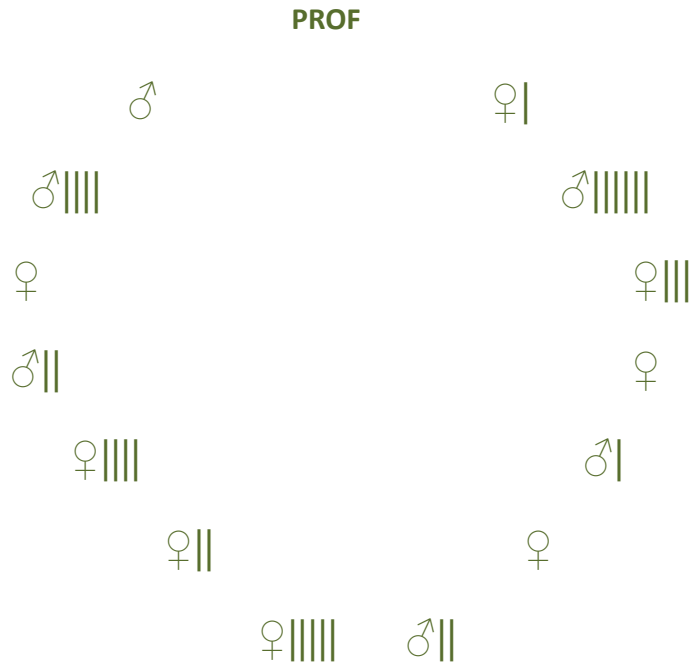
II. “Double-entry” Observation Notes

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 immediately afterwards.) Occasionally marking down the time can also help you get a sense of how long particular segments of the class take.

Notes such as these can be usefully paired with the discussion “map” on the following page. Here’s an example:

Time	Description	Reflection
11:25	AH greets Ss as they arrive. One S asks question about homework; AH says she’ll address that in class. Agenda written on board.	Easy rapport with students—seems organized (agenda on board). Impressed that she held off on answering Ss question—I think I sometimes jump in too quickly with an answer.
11:30	AH closes door and says “reading quiz!” Ss put away books and get out paper. AH reads through 5 questions and waits about 90 seconds between each. Invites Ss to suggest “bonus” question – S7 speaks up immediately. Ss laugh.	Ss seem to know what’s coming—this must be a regular thing. Interesting to let the Ss help write the quiz – what happens if someone suggests a bad question? But they sure like it.
11:36	Couple Ss come in late; don’t get out paper; just sit there AH reads through questions one more time and then after a minute calls “time!” and Ss pass up papers.	Looks like a regular thing—they already know they don’t get to do the quiz if they’re late; she must be clear about her expectations. I wonder how Ss feel about that...they don’t look frustrated. Maybe something to try.
11:40	AH points to agenda and elaborates on what they’re doing that day. Asks if there’s anything else she should include.	I get why an agenda is helpful, but as a student I used to feel that too detailed an agenda hampered spontaneity in a class, so I resist them now. Although I suppose it depends on how strictly an instructor sticks to it. I like that she asks for input; I should do more of that.

III. Mapping Class Discussion



Analysis:

14 students: 6 men, 8 women
10 student participated (71%)

Students made 30 comments total
15 comments were by men (50% of total)
15 comments were by women (50% of total)

4 of the men participated (67% of men in the class)
5 of the women participated (63% of women in the class)

FINISHING UP: THE FINAL MEETING (“SQUARE SHARE”)

As emphasized above, the focus of Teaching Squares is on self-reflection rather than on offering critique or advice. This perspective is extremely important to remember in the final meeting of the group, when you come together to share what you’ve learned.

Participants in other programs have found that by keeping their discussion focused on self-reflection, they avoid evoking defensiveness and instead create mutually-supportive environments that energize everyone involved.

Of course, each group can decide for itself what kind of conversation will be most useful to them. Still, it is important to respect the trust among participants: you should not discuss your views of your colleagues’ teaching with others—including chairs, deans, or provosts.

Here are some suggested questions for that final meeting:

- What have you learned about your teaching philosophy from your classroom observations? (Could be something new; could be something affirmed.) What personal values and convictions do you bring to your teaching?
- How has the experience of again being in the “learner” role impacted how you think about your teaching?
- What have you learned is one of your teaching strengths?
- What aspects of your teaching would you wish to improve—and how might you do this?
- What surprised you about the experience? Were any assumptions about teaching challenged by what you observed?
- What is one thing you learned that will make your own teaching more effective?
- What is one thing you learned that you are going to apply next semester in your classroom?

