

# TEACHING SQUARES

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## What are Teaching Squares?

Teaching squares are reciprocal classroom observations that foster self-reflection about one's teaching. A square is formed by four instructors who visit each other's classes over a short period of time (i.e., four weeks or a term). In teaching squares, members engage in a confidential, non-judgmental formative process promoting the enhancement of teaching and student learning.

## Benefits

The teaching squares approach aims to enhance teaching and learning through a structured process of classroom observation, self-reflection and peer-based discussion. At the end of the teaching square experience, participants will be able to:

- Share what they have learned from watching their colleagues' teaching.
- Determine any changes they may want to implement in their own teaching context (and affirm the practices they want to continue doing because these are working well).
- Reflect on the overall teaching square process.

Unlike **peer review of teaching**, the teaching squares is based on *peer observation* and does not necessarily involve peer-evaluation or require peer-feedback (Rogers, 2017). Instead, participants reflect on their own teaching practice based on observing their colleagues' teaching.

When participants from diverse disciplines participate in the squares, they benefit from learning about teaching approaches and techniques that may not commonly be used within their own discipline (Haave, 2018). Alternatively, when the squares are organized within a department or discipline, participants may benefit from developing a strong sense of camaraderie with fellow colleagues. This can shift the departmental culture to increase dialogues surrounding pedagogy and curricular issues (Colgan & DeLong, 2015).

## Process

### The Initial Organizational Meeting

- Articulate and share goals to better support one another.
- Establish classroom visitation schedule.
- It may be helpful for the observer(s) to choose a lens (e.g.,

teaching methods, classroom interactions, student engagement, etc.) through which to focus their attention. Discuss this as a group for shared understanding.

- Exchange relevant teaching materials to provide context (e.g., syllabus).
- Create group guidelines and discuss expectations.

### Classroom Observation

- Observer will attend the class, either individually or as a group, as discussed during the initial organizational meeting.
- Brief notes of personal reflections during the classroom observation may help consolidate one's experience and learning.

### Post-Observation Debrief

- Shortly after the classroom observations, all four faculty get together to share experiences and engage in self-reflection to identify tangible ways to improve one's own teaching. The focus of this conversation is on what the observer learned (i.e., it is not about providing feedback to the person who taught) (Berry, 2008).

## References

- Berry, D. (2008). Learning by observing our peers. *Collected Essays on Learning and Teaching*, 1, 99-104. Retrieved from <https://celt.uwindsor.ca/index.php/CELT/article/view/3186>
- Colgan, M. & DeLong, M. (2015). A teaching polygon makes a learning community enterprise. *Primus*, 25(1), 41-49. DOI: 10.1080/10511970.2014.899534
- Haave, N. (2018). Teaching squares bring cross-disciplinary perspectives [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/faculty-development/teaching-squares-cross-disciplinary-perspectives>
- Rogers, T. Peer review of teaching in higher education: a literature review. Retrieved from <https://www.otago.ac.nz/humanities/otago666674.pdf>

*The Teaching Squares is a faculty development tool created by Anne Wessely from St. Louis Community College and is adapted widely by various colleges and universities.*

# PEER REVIEW OF TEACHING

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## What is Formative Peer Review of Teaching?

The formative peer review of teaching (PRT) is a process whereby academic colleagues give and receive feedback on their teaching. It is meant to support the teaching capabilities of the instructors involved and, ultimately, to enhance student learning (Grainger, Crimmins, Burton & Oprescu, 2016). Ideally, the process is collegial and collaborative and focussed on the goals of the person being reviewed.

## Benefits

The benefits of the formative PRT include:

- Improves teaching practice and student learning
- Generates collegial dialogue on teaching
- Brings further attention to instructor-student interactions and student engagement
- Decreases pedagogical solitude (and may build collaborative norms)
- Enhances scholarly approaches to teaching
- Fosters dissemination of effective teaching practices
- Less reliance on student evaluations of teaching as the only source of data for the evaluation of teaching

(Teoh, Ming & Khan, 2016; Torres, Lopes, Valente & Mouraz, 2017)

## Process

Though peer review can be of various aspects of teaching (e.g., course materials, laboratory teaching, classroom observation, etc.), the process outlined below is specifically for the classroom observation of teaching.

### Instructor and reviewer match up

- Since both individuals need to agree that this is a good fit, it is helpful to have an initial meeting to discuss your respective approaches to teaching and your hopes for the PRT process.

### Pre-observation conversation

- The instructor being reviewed and the reviewer meet to discuss the instructor's goals for the review and any relevant materials.

### Observation

- The reviewer observes the classroom teaching at a predetermined date and time.

### Post-observation conversation

- The instructor and reviewer meet to discuss the observed class with the instructor's goals for the PRT in mind.

For details and documentation to support the above process, please visit the [Formative Peer Review of Teaching](#) section of the CTLT website or watch the [PRT video series](#) on the CTLT website.

## References

- Grainger, P., Crimmins, G., Burton, K., & Oprescu, F. (2016). Peer review of teaching in higher education—a practitioner's reflection. *Reflective Practice, 17*(5), 523-534.
- Teoh, S. L., Ming, L. C., & Khan, T. M. (2016). Faculty perceived barriers and attitudes toward peer review of classroom teaching in higher education settings: A meta-synthesis. *SAGE Open, 6*(3), 2158244016658085.
- Torres, A. C., Lopes, A., Valente, J. M., & Mouraz, A. (2017). What catches the eye in class observation? Observers' perspectives in a multidisciplinary peer observation of teaching program. *Teaching in Higher Education, 22*(7), 822-838.