

Biology Teaching Squares

Executive Summary

What is a teaching square (TS)?

Teaching squares are an opportunity for faculty to gain insight into their own teaching through a non-evaluative process of reciprocal classroom observation and self-reflection.

What is the time commitment?

TS members commit to attending an organizational meeting early in the semester, to visiting the other square members classes at least once, and to meeting for follow-up at the end of the semester (total=~5hr over semester). TS members will also share syllabi and other relevant course information. Note: the Center for Teaching and Learning at Stonehill College notes that a class visit of no less than 45 minutes is necessary to adequately sample the classroom experience. Regarding our class schedule at PLU, TS participants should not feel obligated to stay for an entire 1hr 45 min class period.

How is this “non-evaluative”?

The purpose of the TS is to spur personal self-reflection rather than peer evaluation. Conversations are focused on what each member has learned about his/her teaching through the observation process. Direct commentary on colleagues' performance is avoided.

What are the cornerstones of teaching squares?

Reciprocity and Shared Responsibility: Through the mutual exchange of visits with TS partners, participants assume the dual roles of the observer and the observed, teacher and student. By jointly arranging classroom visits and exchanging information, all participants minimize the effort that must be expended by one person. This structure facilitates a team effort, team result, and a climate of collegiality.

Self-Referential Reflection: The TS is an opportunity for each member to report what he/she has learned from the observation experience. It is NOT an opportunity to improve a partner's teaching. Keeping observations self-focused avoids any hint of evaluation or judgment that could contribute to a climate of defensiveness rather than collaboration.

Appreciation: The final follow-up session is an opportunity to identify and celebrate behaviors and practices that create a productive environment for learning.

Mutual Respect: TS participants enter classrooms with an attitude of empathy and respect for both the instructor and students, recognizing that different methods and techniques are required in different classrooms.

What are the benefits to participants?

- Observe, analyze, and celebrate good teaching in all its forms
- Increase your understanding & appreciation for the work of your colleagues
- Experience the excitement & confusion of being a student
- Re-energize your teaching → Talk with colleagues about best practices
- Observe other instructors → Reflect on your own teaching practices
- Re-ignite your passion for teaching → Create collaborative connections

What are the benefits beyond the TS?

- By observing each other's classes, we will be better equipped to write letters for each other during the tenure and promotion process. We will be able to speak about each other's teaching in a substantive way that is missed by the current use of only student evaluations as a measure of teaching.
- The TS program could be used as a springboard for a larger division- or campus-wide program.
- Data collected during the TS pilot will be used for a NSF IUSE grant application focused on faculty development