

# Self-Directed Teaching Squares Guide

*Originally created by Anne Wessely from St. Louis Community College, Teaching Squares have been widely implemented and adapted in universities and colleges across North America and the UK. This guide has been modified from Carol Berenson's "[Teaching Squares: Observe and Reflect On Teaching and Learning](#)" from the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning at the University of Calgary (2017).*

## What you'll find in this resource:

- Benefits of participating in Teaching Squares
- Overview of how Teaching Squares work
- Step-by-step guide to conducting your own Teaching Squares
- Example templates

## Overview

Teaching Squares are designed to enhance conversations about teaching and learning, foster group discussion and community through reciprocal peer observation, and provide space to engage in a self-reflection practice aimed at achieving personal teaching goals. Teaching Squares address the issue of teaching being a private endeavor by creating opportunities for peer observation, reflection, and discussion. They contribute to a more collaborative teaching culture and elevate the status of teaching in academic contexts.

## By participating in Teaching Squares, educators can:

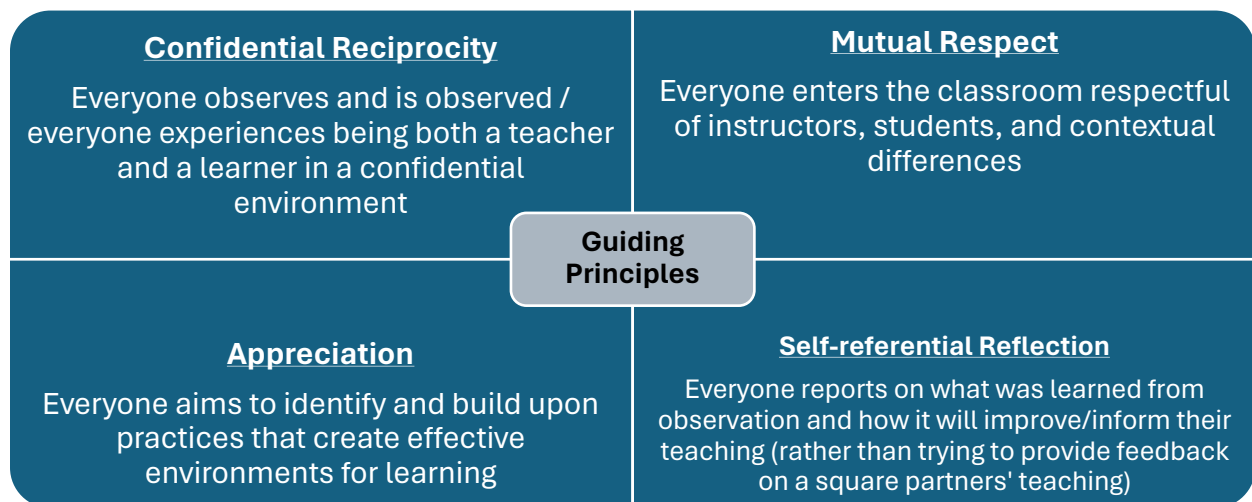
- Gain insights and consider new perspectives through observing, analyzing, and reflecting on the teaching and learning practices by their peers.
- Appreciate Colleagues' work in a collaborative, supportive environment.
- Develop your personal teaching philosophy by engaging in a critical reflective practice that takes into consideration how others engage in teaching and learning in their classrooms.
- Implement new approaches to teaching and learning in your classrooms by setting personal development goals and intentions for course redesign.

## What can you learn about your teaching from having observed your peers?

Unlike some teaching and learning activities that focus on peer review and providing feedback to peers, Teaching Squares focus on turning observations of peers into self-evaluation and reflective practice.

## How do Teaching Squares work?

Although the format and number of participants may vary, the typical Teaching Square format involves four instructors who commit to visiting each others' classes once over the term, and then to share and discuss what they have learned from their observations in a final group meeting. The experience is structured to promote supportive, open, and energizing interactions among participants, fostering a culture of collaborative learning and teaching improvement.



## The Step-by-step Teaching Squares process

- 1. Initial square gathering:** During this first meeting with your square partners, take some time to:
  - a. Review the program guidelines
  - b. Set your personal goals
  - c. Discuss your expectations as a group
  - d. Establish an observation schedule based on everyone's availability/teaching schedules
- 2. Preparing for observations:** In preparation of going into your square partners' classes:

- a. Choose a focus for the observation period
  - b. Select a note-taking method for during observation
  - c. Share important contextual information about your class with partners in advance of their class visits – consider answering a few of the following questions to help everyone prepare:
    - i. What are your main goals for the course?
    - ii. What purpose does the course serve in the major or general curriculum?
    - iii. Why do students take this course?
    - iv. How would you characterize your students this semester?
    - v. How often have you taught this course before?
    - vi. Are you trying anything new this semester?
  - d. *\*Remember, the goal of your observations is **not** to provide feedback to your partners, but to collect data that will help you reflect on your teaching goals*
3. **Classroom visits:** Attend your partners' classes at the agreed upon time
  - a. Stay for the full class if you're able
  - b. Restrict yourself to the role of observer
  - c. Take notes (consider using a template to help organize your observations and reflections – sample templates provided in the Appendix.)
4. **Optional debrief meetings:** Some participants enjoy debriefing one-on-one after an observation period with one of their partners. This step is optional, but it is important that the observer remembers their role, which is to share their observations and what they learned rather than providing their partner with directive feedback.
5. **Reflections:** Write and expand on your thoughts about your observations after each class. Consider using a template to create a framework around your thinking. (Samples provided in the Appendix). Prepare for final meetings.
6. **Wrap-up square share meeting:** Share with your partners any insights you have made regarding your own teaching as a result of observing others and set new teaching goals and/or identify changes you'd like to make in future.

## Appendix – Sample Templates

### Note-Taking Templates for Classroom Observation

#### Template Option 1

**Descriptions & Reflections:** Some people find it helpful to organize their observation notes into *Descriptions* and *Reflections*. This allows you to focus on being descriptive during the observation period, then connecting specific actions to deeper reflective thoughts afterwards.

Time	Description: What's Happening	Personal Reflection

## Template Option 2

What?	So What?	Now What?
<p><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></p>	<p><i>What is the relevance of this observation for you? Why does it stand out? What makes it important? What have you learned?</i></p>	<p><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></p>

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