Teaching Squares @ Western

Teaching Squares are an innovative approach towards peer review of teaching and educational practice that leverages the interdisciplinary potential of the university and the synergy of small group collaboration.

Teaching Squares is based on four cornerstone values (pictured below) that emphasise the collegiality in the peer review of teaching and educational practice.

In this document you will find advice on the organisation, logistics, and approach to help you make your Teaching Squares experience a success.

**Reciprocity**

**and Shared Responsibility**

**Appreciation**

**Self-Reflection**

**Mutual Respect**

# TEACHING SQUARES: An Overview

Teaching Squares offers academics at any stage in their career an opportunity to gain new insight into their own teaching and curriculum design and delivery through a non-evaluative process of reciprocal teaching observation or curriculum review and self-reflection. The four academics in each “square” agree to visit one another’s face-to-face/synchronous/asynchronous classes, or share aspects of their curriculum design or delivery and then 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, curriculum and assessment with an interdisciplinary lens.

## How do Teaching Squares Work?

Teaching squares focus primarily on ***peer observation***, which involves more of a reflective approach to sharing teaching and curriculum approaches. Specific feedback can be sought from within the teaching square—thus crossing over into ***peer review***—but this is at the discretion of individual members.

Teaching Square members initially meet to discuss expectations and logistics. They all arrange to visit one another’s classes, share learning materials, learning guides and/or other relevant unit information to others in the Square. Once all observations are complete, the Teaching Square members meet again to discuss what they’ve learned and can provide each other with constructive, formative feedback.

Below is a possible sequence for conducting a Teaching Square:

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| Step One | First Meeting of Teaching Squares | Set out your intentions and themes for peer observation in your Square and indicate what times are best for visiting each other’s classes or the sharing of materials/resources. Page 5 of this document suggests some resources that you can enegage with to assist with the process of Teaching Squares. |
| Step Two | First Week of Peer Observations | With four participants, it may not be feasible to visit everyone’s class in a single week. |
| Step Three | Second Week of Peer Observations (if needed) | Reflect on observations and summarise observation notes |
| Step Four | Final Meeting of Teaching Squares | Teaching Squares meet again to share their reflections/feedback with one another. |

## Who Can Participate? How are Squares Assigned?

All Western academics with teaching or curriculum responsibilities are encouraged to participate. Squares are most successful when they consist of various levels of experience from a range of disciplines and schools. Teaching Squares can either be self-organised by like-minded academics, or you can request to be allocated to a Square. Teaching Squares need to be constituted in an interdisciplinary way, with a mix of disciplines, schools, and clusters represented in the make-up of any given Square.

## When should your peer observations occur?

The timing of your reciprocal peer observations ultimately depends on the focus of your teaching square. If your focus is on teaching materials or assessment, it might be easier to circulate your materials via email or the web-based apps such as Google Drive. If you are observing live teaching practice, you will need to schedule your visits with your teaching square colleagues. A commitment to a timeframe for concluding your teaching square that is amenable to everyone is strongly encouraged to get the most of this experience.

## 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 up our teaching and curriculum 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 of the work of their colleagues.

You or your colleagues may wish to ask for specific feedback, and that is entirely at the discretion of each member of the group. This should be discussed during the first meeting of the teaching square. Resources and templates can be made available depending on the needs of group members.

The Cornerstones of Successful Teaching Squares

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| 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  minimising the effort for any single participant and fostering a spirit of collegiality. | 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. |
| 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. | 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. |

## Logistics

The initial meeting is a chance for the group to establish guidelines on how they’d like the experience to unfold. This first meeting would also involve what themes, topics, or points of focus the teaching square will involve. This may include topics such as:

* Alternative Assessment
* Work Integrated Learning
* Hybrid-Flexible-Flipped (HyFlex @ WSU)
* Transformative Technology
* Transdisciplinary Education
* Asynchronous/Synchronous Teaching and Learning

Here are some discussion points that the group might want to use at this meeting (be sure to bring at least one copy of your learning guide to consult; you might want to bring copies for others as well):

When should I visit? If you are engaging in direct observation of classroom teaching, you will need to plan when is an appropriate time for your teaching square colleagues to visit. You will need time to inform your students of the visit. The length of the observation may also need to be discussed. If your class is three hours long, that may not be feasible for a full-length observation. So there might be a particular portion of the class that is best for your colleagues to observe.

What kind of materials should I provide to my teaching square? This depends on the focus of your teaching square. You may have a specific activity or learning material you want to share or have reviewed. You should share this with enough context so that your colleagues will understand how it is to be used or what the desired learning experience is.

What resources can we use for our Teaching Square? There is a literature review and a range of templates for engaging in peer review of educational practice. There is no prescribed template, but the following resources are available to use however you see fit:

[Collegial Peer Review of Online Teaching Practice Template](http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/__data/assets/word_doc/0005/1727924/Collegial_peer_review_of_online_teaching_practice_template_final_2.docx)

[Self-Review of Flipped Classrooms](http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/__data/assets/word_doc/0011/1727921/Self-Peer_Student_Review_of_Flipped_Classrooms_Final.docx)

[Embedding a Peer Review Culture in Online and Blended Teaching and Learning](http://www.uq.edu.au/teach/peer/index.html)

[Peer Observation Guide for Fully Online Units](http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1657980/Peer_Observation_Guide_for_Fully_Online_Units_at_Western_Sydney_University.pdf)

What do we do after the teaching square is concluded? After participating in a teaching square, we hope your perspective on the potential for peer review will have been transformed and that you will be able to absorb new ideas from the experience into your practice. This is also an opportunity to think about where to go from here with peer review of teaching and curriculum.

There are further opportunities to engage in peer review of educational practice, including Peer Review with a Buddy, and developing Peer Review Case Studies with us to expand the knowledge-base on peer review @ Western.

If you want to participate in one-on-one peer review, you can register your interest at our [Peer Review with a Buddy](https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/learning_futures/home/21st_century_curriculum_project2/21C_project/peer_review_of_teaching/Peer_Review_Buddies) webpage. You can also submit a case study at our [Peer Review Case Study](https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/learning_futures/home/21st_century_curriculum_project2/21C_project/peer_review_of_teaching/peer_review_case_studies2) page.