

# Teaching Squares



## Participant Handbook



**Center for Teaching and Learning**

**<http://www.stonehill.edu/ctl>**

Center for Teaching and Learning  
Duffy 114 Stonehill College  
Easton, MA 02357 (508) 565-1324  
<http://www.stonehill.edu/ctl>

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Dear Teaching Squares Participant,

Thank you for joining in the Teaching Squares program! I hope that through this process of observation and shared reflection, you will experience a renewed enthusiasm for teaching and an increased appreciation of the excellent work of your colleagues and the potential of your students.

My goal is that Teaching Squares will provide you opportunities to observe, analyze, and celebrate good teaching; to relive the joy and confusion of being a student; and to formulate plans for enhancing your own teaching based on your observations and reflections and the shared reflections of your Square partners.

This packet is a resource meant to guide you through the Teaching Squares process. In it you'll find:

- an overview of the Teaching Squares program,
- the “cornerstone” values underlying the program,
- suggestions for establishing common expectations among your group,
- tips on preparing for a good observation, and
- ideas for effectively wrapping up your experience.

Other questions are likely to arise, so I hope you will contact me about anything not addressed in this packet. I have organized our Teaching Squares program based on successful programs at other institutions, but I depend on your feedback to keep it relevant for Stonehill faculty. I will ask you to complete a formal evaluation of the program at its completion, but please let me know of any concerns or suggestions that arise in the meantime.

I know it can sometimes feel risky to invite colleagues into our classes, and I applaud your willingness to take that risk. I am excited about this program and grateful to have an enthusiastic group of colleagues to help get it rolling.

With sincerest regards,

Stacy Grooters  
Director, Center for Teaching and Learning

*Acknowledgements:* Overwhelming thanks and recognition are due to Anne Wessely who first developed the Teaching Squares project at St. Louis Community College and from whose excellent materials I have borrowed shamelessly. I have also included materials adapted from resources developed by Rosalind Gilbert and Akber Remu at George Brown College in Toronto.

## Teaching Squares: An Overview

The Teaching Squares program provides faculty an opportunity to gain new insight into their teaching through a non-evaluative process of reciprocal classroom observation and self-reflection. The four faculty in each “teaching square” agree to visit each other’s classes over the course of a semester and then meet to discuss what they’ve learned from their observations.

By allowing faculty to be “learners” again in their colleagues’ classes, Teaching Squares can open up unique spaces for reflection and conversation about teaching.

### What’s the commitment?

Teaching Square members commit to attending an initial meeting early in the semester to discuss logistics and establish expectations with the others in their square, to visit the other square members’ classes at least once, and then to meet again for a follow-up meeting once all the observations are completed. Each member will also need to provide syllabi and other relevant information about the courses being visited to the others in the Square.

The CTL will assist with coordinating visits, but each group will determine its own schedule. The following is a rough suggested schedule that each square can adapt to its own needs:

Week 5	<b>Square introductions</b>	Meet your square at the CTL to discuss expectations, plan a preliminary schedule, and ask Stacy any last questions.
Week 6	<b>Finalize schedule and exchange materials</b>	Confirm your visit times and pass on any relevant course materials (such as a syllabus) to your partners.
Weeks 7 - 11	<b>Class visits</b>	Visit one class of each of your square partners and record what you observe.
Week 12	<b>Self-reflection</b>	Look back over your observation notes in preparation for the Square Share.
Week 13	<b>Square Share</b>	Meet (over a meal?) with your square to share your reflections.

## Who can participate?

All Stonehill faculty – full-time and part-time – are welcome to participate. Squares are most successful when they consist of faculty with various levels of experience from a range of disciplines.

## How is this a “non-evaluative” process?

Teaching Squares are meant to spur personal self-reflection rather than peer evaluation. Participants focus their conversations on what they’ve learned about their own teaching from the observation process and avoid direct commentary on their colleagues’ performance.

The goal is to encourage a respectful, safe, mutually-supportive experience for all involved. Participants are encouraged to approach the process in a spirit of appreciation – even celebration – of the work of their colleagues. The “Cornerstones” below elaborate on this goal.



## Teaching Squares: The Cornerstones

The Cornerstones of Teaching Squares are those critical attitudes and behaviors that, when exhibited by all participants, contribute towards creating a safe, mutually-supportive, energizing environment for sharing the joys and challenges of teaching.

Reciprocity and Shared Responsibility	Appreciation
Self-referential Reflections	Mutual Respect

### Reciprocity and Shared Responsibility

Through the mutual exchange of visits with their Teaching Squares partners, participants assume the dual roles of the observer and the observed, teacher and student. They simultaneously experience and thus share the opportunities and risks of inviting others into their classrooms.

Teaching Squares participants jointly assume the tasks of arranging classroom visits and exchanging course information. By fully participating in the organization and administration of the Square they minimize the effort that must be expended by any single participant. Such self-leadership maintains a climate of collegiality. This structure facilitates a team effort and a team result.

### Self-Referential Reflection

The Square Share is an opportunity to report what you have learned from the observation experience. It is NOT an opportunity to improve a Square Partner's teaching. By keeping your observations self-focused participants avoid any hint of evaluation or judgment that could contribute to a climate of defensiveness or suspicion.

### Appreciation

The Square Share reflection session is an opportunity to identify and celebrate the behaviors and practices that create a productive environment for learning. Expressing observations in a positive way offers a goal to be pursued and a source of energy for achieving that goal.

### Mutual Respect

Participants enter their Square Partners' classroom with an attitude of empathy and respect for both the instructor and the students, recognizing that different methods and techniques are required in different disciplines and classroom situations.

## Your "Square Introduction": setting expectations

The "square introduction" meeting is a time for your group to establish some guidelines for how you'd like your square experience to unfold. Most important to this discussion is clarifying group members' expectations, so there are fewer surprises later on. The following questions are suggested as points you might want to clarify and can serve as a starting point for this discussion.

### 1. What are we hoping to gain from this experience?

This is the most important question to clarify today and should probably be returned to throughout your square experience. Being aware of your own and your colleagues' goals can help you be a better square participant. You can use the following chart to record your own and your colleagues' goals for the square:

<b>What I hope to gain from the "square":</b>	
<b>Partner #1's goals:</b>	
<b>Partner #2's goals:</b>	
<b>Partner #3's goals:</b>	

## 2. What are our responsibilities to the group?

For the most part, your responsibilities to your square are few and straight-forward:

- coordinate with the group to schedule class visits and the final reflection meeting
- share relevant materials with the group to provide context for visits to your class
- come to class visits prepared to observe
- come to the final meeting prepared to share your self-reflections on your experiences

However, you might also want to clear up a few other questions:

- How will we prepare for our final get-together? Is it ok to just come prepared to talk, or should we type up our reflections to share?
- Do we want someone to serve as our “square leader” (to send out a “nudge” email or two if the group is getting off track)?
- How strict will we be in adhering to the “only self-reflection” spirit of the square? Do we want to get feedback on any aspects of our teaching? How much of our final conversation will be devoted to such kind of feedback?
- Do we want to appoint someone to take responsibility for keeping our final reflection conversation on track?

## Your “Square Introduction”: logistics

The “square introduction” meeting is a time for your group to establish some guidelines for how you’d like your square experience to unfold. The following questions are suggested as points you might want to clarify and can serve as a starting point for discussion.

### 1. When should I visit?

I encourage you to schedule all your visits now, since it’s easiest while everyone’s together. Feel free to use the handy chart below to keep track of your visiting schedule.

*One word of caution:* Don’t fall into the trap of assuming that a class day that involves a lot of student-centered work (small group activities, etc.) is a day when you’re “not teaching” and so is not an interesting day to be observed. Many people sign up for Teaching Squares because of an interest in learning about alternatives to lecturing – and in observing how people get students involved – so don’t let a lack of traditional “teaching” (e.g. lecturing) on a particular day scare you off from inviting someone in to visit.

### 2. How long should I stay?

Class times can vary considerably. Observing an entire class session from start to finish typically offers the best (and least disruptive) experience for you, your Square Partner, and the students. If scheduling conflicts do not allow you to stay for an entire class, discuss with your Square Partner the least disruptive means of joining and leaving the class. Past participants have found that a visit of no less than 45 minutes is necessary to adequately sample the classroom experience.

<b>My Square Partners</b>	<b>Classes I’m visiting (date, time, location)</b>	<b>When I’m being visited (date, time, location)</b>
<b>Partner #1:</b>		
<b>Partner #2:</b>		
<b>Partner #3:</b>		

### **3. What is my role when I visit: observer or class participant?**

The urge to participate in class activities can be nearly irresistible. It is so easy to be swept up in the joy of being a student again and to forget that the purpose of the class visit is to observe your Square Partner's work. Previous participants have found that they could best fulfill their Teaching Squares goals by restricting themselves to the role of observer. With your Square Partner's consent you can always visit the class again as a participant!

### **4. What kind of context should I provide about my class?**

Getting a sense of the “big picture” of a course can make it easier to make sense of what's happening in a class and thus can lead to a more meaningful observation experience. I highly recommend exchanging syllabi with your square partners, as well as copies of relevant course assignments and texts. You might also consider filling your colleagues in on some of the following questions:

- What are your main goals for this course?
- What purpose does it serve in the major or the general curriculum?
- Why do students take this course?
- How would you characterize your students this semester? are they a typical group?
- How often have you taught this course before?
- What does a typical day look like for this course?
- What are your goals for the day your colleague is coming to visit?
- Are you trying anything new this semester?

### **5. (How) should I introduce you to students?**

Most students are very curious about the presence of a visitor in the classroom. Past participants have liked to introduce the visiting professors and to explain the purpose for their visits and their roles (observer or participant) in the class session. They find that most students are very impressed to learn that their instructor is participating in a project to improve teaching and learning.

### **6. When should we meet up again?**

Although the wrap-up “Square Share” is a month or two down the road, getting it scheduled now will up your odds that you find a mutually agreeable time. I'd encourage you to meet in a comfortable location away from campus – perhaps over a meal – and the CTL is happy to foot the bill for your lunch or dinner.

## Preparing for a Good Class Visit

There's a lot going on in any class, and it can be a challenge to keep track of it all without a plan going in. The next few pages give you three possible options for organizing your observation experience: choosing a lens, "double-entry" observation notes, and discussion "mapping."

### I. Choosing a Lens

One approach that works for some people is to choose a particular "lens" through which to focus their observations. Going in with some specific questions in mind can help you focus your attention and lead to a more meaningful observation. Here are some possible lenses, though there are dozens more possibilities:

#### Motivation

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

#### Content

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

#### Diversity

- Am I knowledgeable of my classroom demographics?  
How do I accommodate differences in my learners?
- How do I ensure my curriculum addresses diversity?
- How inclusive am I in my teaching practice?

#### Instructional Strategies

- Is there variety in the way I deliver material?
- How can 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 learning processes?
- Do my questions generate meaningful discussion?

#### Classroom climate

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

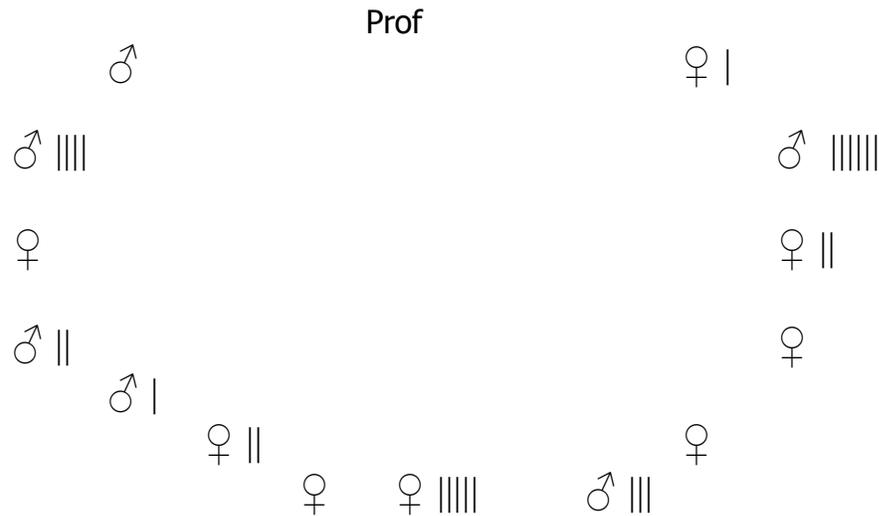
## II. "Double-entry" Observation Notes

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 afterwards. Occasionally marking down the time as you go 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 one of the discussion "maps" on the following page. Here's an example:

Time	Description of what's happening	Personal reflections
11:25	AH greets Ss as they come in. One S asks a question about the homework – AH says she'll address that in class. An agenda has already been written up on the board.	I like the easy rapport with students – seems organized with agenda already 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, 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.	ok, definitely looks like a regular thing – and they already know they don't get to do the quiz if they're late. She must be really clear about her expectations. I wonder how Ss feel about that . . . they don't look frustrated. Might be an interesting thing 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. Though a lot of that depends on how strict the instructor sticks to it. I like that she asks for input – I should do more of that.

### III. "Mapping" class discussion



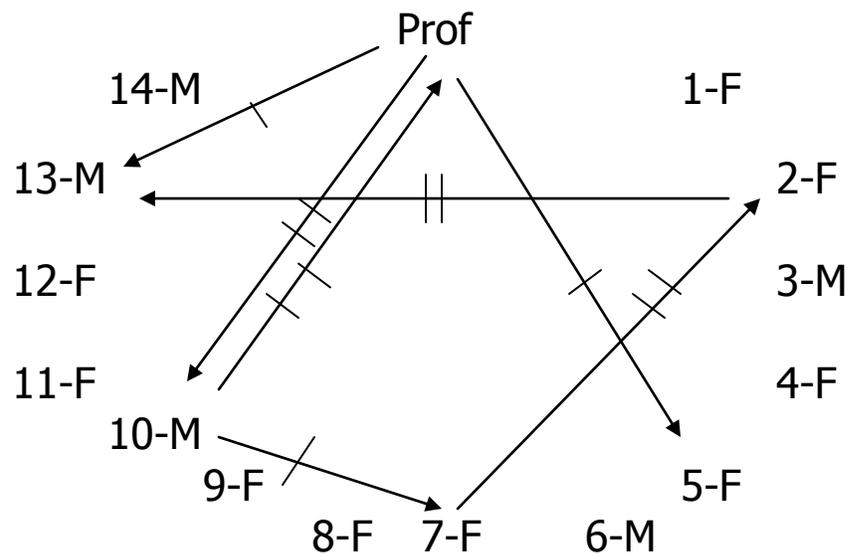
Analysis:

14 students: 6 men, 8 women  
 9 students participated (64% of the class)

Students made 26 comments total  
 16 of those comments were by men (62% of total comments)  
 10 of those comments were by women (38% of total comments)

5 of the men participated (83% of the men in the class)  
 4 of the women participated (50% of the women in the class)

### Another approach to "mapping" discussion



## Finishing Up: The Square Share

As I've emphasized above, the focus of Teaching Squares is on *self-reflection* rather than critique or advice giving. This perspective is most important to remember in the final meeting of the group when you come together to share what you've learned throughout the process.

Participants in other Teaching Square programs have found that by keeping their discussions focused on self-reflection, they avoid evoking feelings of defensiveness and instead cultivate safe, respectful, and 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. Whatever you choose, however, I'd still encourage you to **resist the academic tendency to "leave no criticism behind."**

*Reflection Suggestions:* The following are some suggestions of questions you might consider discussing with your square partners or reflecting on privately before you meet for the final wrap-up meeting:

1. What have you learned about your teaching philosophy from your classroom observations (it could be something new or something that has been affirmed)? What personal values do you bring to your teaching?
2. How has the experience of again being in the "learner" role impacted your teaching?
3. What have you learned is one of your teaching strengths?
4. What aspect of your teaching do you wish to improve? How are you going to do this?
5. What surprised you during this experience? What assumptions about teaching were challenged by what you observed?
6. What is one thing you learned that will make your teaching more effective?
7. What is one thing you learned that you are going to apply next semester in your classroom?



