

Teaching Squares

Handbook for Participants

Teaching Squares: Originated by
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Kirkwood Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching

A Note to Participants:

Thank you for joining the Teaching Squares project. KCELT honors your willingness to open your classroom and share your teaching expertise with colleagues. I hope that through this process of observation and shared reflection you will experience increased appreciation of the excellent work of colleagues, increased collegiality, additions to and refinements of your instructional strategies.

Hope Burwell

Kirkwood

Center for

Excellence in

Learning and

Teaching

What is Teaching Squares?

The Teaching Squares Project attempts to improve teaching and build community through a structured, *non-evaluative* process of classroom observation and shared reflection.

A Teaching Square consists of four faculty participants who:

- Observe at least one class taught by each Square Partner (a total of 3 observations)
- Reflect on the class observation experience *in writing*
- Share reflections with Square Partners, and the Director of the Center for Excellence in Learning & teaching
- Gather as a group at the end of your observations to share observations with all of the semester's project participants

A Teaching Square experience offers you the opportunity to improve your own teaching by observing your Square Partners and their students in an actual classroom situation.

By participating in the Teaching Squares Project you will have an opportunity to:

- observe, analyze and celebrate good teaching
- increase your understanding of and appreciation for the work of colleagues
- experience again the joy and confusion of being a student
- formulate a plan for enhancing your own teaching based on your observations and reflections and the shared reflections of your Square Partners.

Cornerstones for Participants

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

Reciprocity and Shared Responsibility

Through the mutual exchange of visits with Teaching Squares partners, one assumes the dual roles of observer and observed, student and teacher, simultaneously experiencing the opportunities and risks of inviting others into our classrooms.

Teaching Squares participants jointly assume the tasks of arranging classroom visits and exchanging pertinent course information. Fully participating in the organization and administration of the Square minimizes the effort that must be expended by any single participant. 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 we have learned from the observation experience. It is NOT an opportunity to improve a Square Partner's teaching. By keeping our observations self-focused we avoid any hint of evaluation or judgment that could contribute to a climate of defensiveness and suspicion.

Appreciation

The final Square reflection session is an opportunity to identify and celebrate the behaviors and practices that create a productive environment for learning observed in your individual Teaching Square. This Squares Celebration is an opportunity to share with all the Squares what you learned from your own. Expressing observations in a positive way offers a goal to be pursued and a source of energy for achieving that goal.

Mutual Respect

Square Partners enter one another's classrooms with an attitude of empathy and respect, recognizing that different methods and techniques are required in different disciplines and classroom situations.

Project Timeline

The Teaching Squares project extends over a period of several weeks. This schedule was established to allow completion of all assigned tasks with a minimal disruption to your normal schedule. If you follow the suggested schedule, participating in the project should require about one to two hours per week of your time.

Week	Activity	Your Tasks
Week 1	Squares organization meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet Square partners. • Establish dates for visits
Week 2	First class visit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send or receive materials pertinent to the class being observed. • Read or skim what the students should have covered before class. • Visit. • Record observations.
Week 3	Second class visit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As listed above
Week 4	Third class visit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As listed above
Week 5	<p style="text-align: center;">Written Reflection</p> <p>This is the document you send to KCELT in order to receive the professional renewal credit (if you're fulltime) or stipend (if you're adjunct) for participating in a Squares project.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read through your observations with an eye for the best practices you witnessed and the ways you might use these to refine your own teaching. • Prepare to meet with Square Partners to discuss observations and plans for implementing some of what you've seen.
Week 6	Square Partners Gather	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather over lunch or at some other convenient time to share observations with the whole group.

Square Organization

Each Square sets its own rules for operating. Included here are suggestions for operating. These suggestions may or may not work for your Square. Discuss them at your first group meeting.

You and your Square Partners will need to determine the:

1. Amount of notice required for a visit

In the event that you don't decide on the dates of classroom visits at your first gathering (a mistake), you will need to come to consensus on the amount of notice required before your visits. St. Louis Community College says, "Since the purpose of Teaching Squares is to observe your Square Partners in their "natural" state, we found that 24 hours notice was generally sufficient. A bit more notice guarantees that your Square Partner can return your call and confirm your visit."

2. Information exchange

How and when will you share your syllabus, pertinent course information, any necessary background reading? Your Teaching Square packet provides a convenient place for organizing and storing this information regardless of when you exchange it.

3. Role of the visiting instructor

The urge to participate in the class activities is nearly irresistible. It is entirely too easy to be swept into the joy of being a student again and to forget that the purpose of the class visit is to either observe your Square Partner at work, or if this is your 3rd, 4th or other additional experience in Teaching Squares, to observe your partners' students. St. Louis says, "We found that we could best fulfill our Teaching Squares goal by restricting our role to that of an observer. With your Square Partner's consent you can always visit the class again as a participant!"

4. Information to be shared with students

Most students are very curious about the presence of a visitor in the classroom. “We like to introduce the visiting professor and to explain the purpose for their visit and their role (observer or participant) in the class session. We have found that most students are very impressed to learn that their instructor is participating in a project to improve teaching.” –St. Louis Community College

5. Classroom Visit Duration

Class times can vary considerably. Observing an entire class session from start to finish 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. A visit of **no less than 50 minutes** is required in order to adequately sample the classroom experience. This means, try to get there before the class starts and stay until it disperses.

6. Square Partners Gathering time and location

Your Square Partners Gathering should occur as soon after you have all visited one another’s classrooms as possible. KCELT strongly urges you to set your Square Partners Gathering **now**.

KCELT’s conference room is available for your Square Partners Gathering, if you call Hope Burwell (ext. 5871) or Lauri Hughes (ext. 7180) to reserve it. We promise the coffee and tea will be fresh. On the other hand, a celebratory lunch in the Class Act is nice too.

Sharing Course Information

In all likelihood, your Square Partners will have an imperfect notion of your course and its function in your students' academic lives.

You can help your Square Partners gain a greater appreciation of the work that you do by providing the following:

- A copy of the course syllabus and/or your schedule of classes and assignments
- A brief description of why these students are taking the course
 - Transfer /or/ career /or/ personal interest
 - Required course for major /or/ general education course /or/ developmental course
- Major teaching goals for the course – such as
 - Higher-order thinking skills
 - Basic academic success skills
 - Discipline-specific knowledge and skills
 - Liberal arts and academic values
 - Work and career preparation
 - Personal development

The Course Information forms included here have been included for your convenience in conveying this information to your Square Partners.

Arranging Classroom Visits

Square Pairs

The Teaching Square Project Timeline has been established to allow you to visit one class per week during the class visitation period. If you have not already established the dates, you will need to contact your Square Partners to arrange for these class visits. The actual visitation schedule will depend on your and your Partners' availability. When constructing the schedule you might want to consider a Square Pair.

A Square Pair is a mutual visit exchange. It is an easy way to organize your visits, and it provides concentrated contact with a Square Partner. A Square Pair-based visitation schedule might look something like this:

Week 1	Partners A & B visit each others' classrooms	Partners C & D visit each others' classrooms
Week 2	Partners A & C visit each other's classrooms	Partners B & D visit each others' classrooms
Week 3	Partners A & D visit each others' classrooms	Partners B & C visit each others' classrooms

Classroom Visitation Checklist

The class that your Partner visits should be as “normal” as possible. The visiting Partner should understand that he/she may have missed some background information critical to understanding that day’s material.

Your Square Partners will find it much easier to follow the flow of your class if you provide the following as soon as you’ve decided which class each will visit:

- The enclosed Course Information Sheet
- Course Syllabus
- Schedule of class topics & assignments
- Textbook or pertinent reading
- Other daily materials

Tip: Use your Teaching Squares folder to collect the materials you receive before and during your class visits. They will be a handy reference when preparing your reflections.

Self-referential Reflections

After completing your classroom visits, you will need to organize your reflections to share with your colleagues. These reflections might be useful additions to teaching portfolios for those of you in the probationary period. If the appropriate Dean approves, they might also be used by your partners in their end of year evaluations. *Send a final version of these to Hope Burwell as attachments to an email. They become part of KCELT's Teaching Squares Assessments folder, and serve to certify that you have earned the professional renewal credit or stipend associated with participating in the Squares project. You may delete participants' names if you like, or if they request it.*

Your Teaching Squares experience offers you the opportunity to improve your own teaching by observing your Square Partners in an actual classroom situation. It is NOT an invitation to offer feedback to improve your Partners' teaching.

Keep your reflections positive and self-referential. Be aware that offering opinions (even positive ones) or direct observations on a Square Partner's teaching will, for some people, create a judgmental climate undermining the trust necessary to the success of the Teaching Squares experience.

These questions may be helpful in shaping your feedback:

How did your participation in Teaching Squares give you a greater appreciation of:

- Your students?
- Your colleagues?
- Kirkwood Community College?
- The teaching profession?

What did you observe that you might use to make your own teaching more effective?

All Squares Celebration & Presentations

During our first three semesters of Teaching Squares, we gathered all squares together near the end of the semester to share what they had learned. However, experience has taught us that this just doesn't work well at Kirkwood. So we have abandoned this practice in favor of encouraging you to meet together over lunch or at some other time suitable to your schedules.

Compensation

Full-time faculty participating in Teaching Squares, will have their work honored through the presentation of a certificate of accomplishment and the awarding of one unit of professional renewal credit (15 contact hours) for engaging in this professional development activity.

Adjunct faculty participating in Teaching Squares, will have their work honored through the presentation of a certificate of accomplishment and receipt of \$75 for engaging in this professional development activity.

