



TEACHING SQUARES PEER OBSERVATION PROGRAM FACILITATION GUIDE

The Institute for Learning & Teaching | Colorado State University

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Great connections. Helpful and supportive evaluation- and opportunity to honestly self-evaluate. – CSU instructor

What are Teaching Squares?

Teaching Squares consists of a group of four instructors who commit to observing each other using a reflection form and providing supportive feedback to each member of the Square. The program includes non-evaluative peer observation, self-reflection, and supportive group feedback while simultaneously providing a forum to build colleague relationships.

History and Foundation of Teaching Squares

Teaching Squares has its roots in community and teaching colleges. It is believed to have been developed at St. Louis Community College and popularized at Stonehill College in Massachusetts. Teaching Squares offers instructors “an opportunity to gain new insight into their teaching through a non-evaluative process of reciprocal classroom observation and self-reflection.”

The spirit of collegiality is foundational to the success of any Teaching Squares program and is established through the four essential program elements of:

1) Reciprocity, 2) Appreciation, 3) Self-referential Reflection, and 4) Mutual Respect. These elements are needed to establish a shared understanding and group environment conducive to inviting new and established colleagues into one’s classroom. They are also needed to be open to giving and receiving supportive feedback.

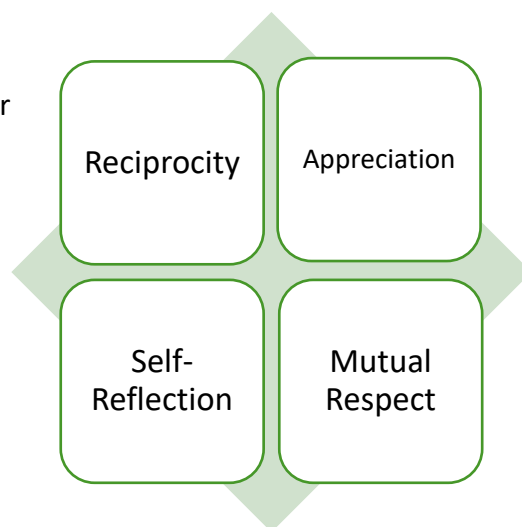


Figure 1: Teaching Squares Program Essentials

It has made me think more objectively about my teaching strategies and I have gained a lot of useful feedback and observations that will help me improve in the future. – CSU instructor

Teaching Squares at CSU

The Institute for Learning and Teaching (TILT) has been offering the [Teaching Squares](#) program since 2018. Since that time, over 60 CSU instructors and graduate students have been a part of Teaching Squares. The [Teaching Effectiveness Framework](#) (TEF) is an integral part of Teaching Squares at CSU. The TEF provides faculty with a set of pedagogical competencies to help focus their developing teaching practice. The TEF is comprised of seven essential, interrelated domains of effective teaching practices—for face-to-face and online instruction—each grounded in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Each domain includes a list of evidence-based practices faculty can use to hone their teaching practice.

The Teaching Squares Program allows anyone *currently teaching* (faculty, instructors, graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), and post-docs) to observe, learn from, and support each other in their quest to become better instructors. The reciprocal nature of the program requires that all participants must be teaching either a face-to-face or online course. The program takes approximately 16 hours over twelve weeks. Meeting times are scheduled at the start of the program to ensure that all participants can commit for the whole experience.

The program provides a forum to empower change, enhance innovation, and inspire growth in teaching. In addition to reflecting on and receiving feedback on teaching practices, participants make connections with colleagues, share ideas, reignite their passion for teaching, and discuss evidence-based instructional practices.

Benefits of Teaching Squares

Common Understanding of What Good Teaching Looks Like

Participants receive a refresher on the TEF at the start of the program. Using a common definition of effective teaching, in addition to evidence-based practices, helps to ensure that participants are in alignment and focused on the observing and providing feedback on pre-defined practices throughout the whole experience.

Focus on Evidence-based Practices

There are seven observation forms that align with each of the domains of the TEF, each form lists the evidence-based practices specific to that domain. The form allows the observer to identify the use of evidence-based practices used during a particular observation session so both parties can feel confident in providing and receiving feedback on their teaching.



Figure 2: Teaching Effectiveness Framework Domains

Collegiality

Teaching Squares promotes collegiality and collaboration among peers by providing a safe space to engage in conversations about teaching. Participants have also reported feeling more supported and less isolated as an instructor.

Insight into Classrooms throughout the Campus

Participants report they enjoy learning from observing classrooms both similar and different from their own. Teaching Squares provides the opportunity to see colleagues teach in a variety of contexts (delivery method, class sizes, discipline, etc.).

Reveals Teaching Strengths

The Teaching Squares program encourages participants to notice and build on teaching strengths. The observation forms and feedback protocol guide participants to recognize use of evidence-based practices that instructors might not have been aware of, thus increasing confidence and self-efficacy.

“There are three principal means of acquiring knowledge ... observation of nature, reflection, and experimentation. Observation collects facts; reflection combines them; experimentation verifies the result of that combination.”
– Denis Diderot

Self-Reflection

Teaching Squares invites faculty to engage in observation and self-reflection on teaching outside of the annual review process. It provides a forum to acknowledge, celebrate and learn from personal success while simultaneously allowing both the participant and observers to objectively look at their own teaching practices.

Supportive Feedback

In addition to the observation forms, when the Squares come together for the feedback session, participants are coached in giving individualized, supportive, and constructive feedback following a feedback protocol.

Recognition through TEI Program

Teaching Squares is affiliated with the [Teaching Effectiveness Initiative \(TEI\) Program](#). Faculty and instructors who participate in the Teaching Squares can earn seven domain experience units (DEUs) in one domain towards a domain certificate of achievement by completing a [TEI Post Implementation Reflection Form](#).

Annual Review of Teaching

Faculty have used the Teaching Squares observation forms as evidence of teaching effectiveness for annual review of teaching. TILT recommends setting one goal in one TEF domain for annual review of teaching. The domain specific observation forms can help participants receive feedback in their designated domain.

It was exciting to talk about teaching and find commonalities even though we all chose different domains. It was helpful for me to try something new. – CSU instructor

Components of Teaching Squares

TILT Facilitated Experience

TILT facilitates Teaching Squares in the spring semester for the CSU teaching community. The-squares are formed randomly and are often cross-disciplinary allowing instructors to experience teaching in a variety of contexts.

Departmental or instructional team squares can be formed upon request; this format allows faculty teaching similar content and/or students to gain insight into the opportunities and challenges faced by colleagues. Please contact Tonya.Buchan@ColoState.Edu if your team would like to facilitate your own Teaching Squares Program. The TILT team can help you get started.

Teaching Squares Workbook

The [Teaching Squares Workbook](#) contains *all* the materials related to running the program, linked in one document. The facilitators give participants access to the workbook at the start of the program and update the workbook with contact information, meeting dates, etc., throughout the program.

Community Agreement

Having someone observe you teaching can be a very vulnerable position. To create a safe space for participants to practice teaching and feel supported while doing so, each cohort develops a community agreement by identifying what they need to feel supported during this time. Confidentiality is at the core of the community agreement for both the facilitators and the participants.

Peer Observations

Observation provides the opportunity to watch other instructors in action, see different ways of teaching, and gain insight into different class environments (class size, content discipline, delivery method, etc.). Participants receive feedback from three colleagues and engage in two observation cycles resulting in six total observations. The observations in each cycle can take place on the same or different days depending on schedules.

Guided Observation Forms

For each observation session, the observed participant identifies *one* TEF domain on which to be observed by all members of the square, allowing the participants to receive feedback from three different perspectives. Each domain has its' own guided observation form, including a list of relevant evidence-based practices, observation question prompts, and a self-reflection space for the observer. This combination allows the observers to provide supportive and robust feedback to the participant on their chosen domain that is centered on evidence-based practices.

The observation forms, feedback, and this experience is designed for growth and self-reflection. TILT does not look at nor retain any of the observation forms, all forms are the sole property of the individual being observed and are intended for use at their discretion. TILT simply provides the space and structure for participants to grow.

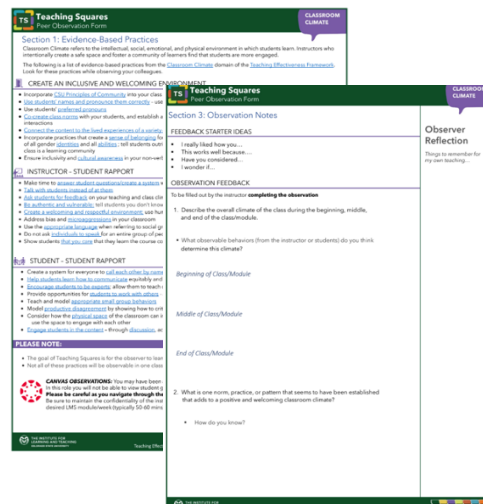


Figure 3: Peer Observation Form - Classroom Climate

Feedback Protocol

During the post-observation meetings, participants give feedback to each other using the *What, So What, Now What protocol*. This protocol gives structure to the feedback back session, including time for self-reflection, guidelines for supportive language, equal time to each participant to receive feedback, and plans for future teaching.

Logistics and Program Timeline

Scheduling and logistics are the *most challenging* component of Teaching Squares. The program takes approximately 16-hours over twelve weeks. Due to busy schedules and the reciprocal nature of the program, it is important to be transparent and emphasize the time commitment and scheduling requirements to ensure participants receive an equitable amount of feedback. In the both the promotional materials and kick-off session, underscore the importance of adhering to dates, showing up to observations, and committing to the Square; in the kick-off session, reinforce the commitment to colleagues during the *Community Agreement Norms Activity*.

Week	Meetings
1	Kick-off Session (90 –120 mins)
2	Pre-observation meeting (Individual squares meet ~60 mins)
3-5	Conduct Observation Cycle #1 (~50 mins x 3 colleagues)
6-7	Post observation #1 meeting (90 mins)
8-10	Conduct Observation Cycle #2 (~50 mins x 3 colleagues)
11-12	Post observation #2/ wrap-up meeting (90 mins)

Table 1: Program Timeline

Materials

Teaching Squares Workbook – the [Teaching Squares Workbook](#) is a common document that contains the following resources:

- Participant list and contact information
- Facilitation team and contact information
- Community Agreements Norms Activity
- Resources – including *TEF Framework at a Glance*, TEF evidence-based practices and self-assessment rubrics, documents for download including readings about peer observation, goal setting form (optional), peer observation forms, practice observation forms, and an agenda for the pre-observation meeting.
- Teaching Squares Program Timeline – the timeline provides a weekly schedule of activities along with agenda and presentation slides.
- Uploading a Post-Implementation Reflection Form to Bridge/MyLearning for the TEI Program.

I feel empowered to continue evaluating my teaching journey and keeping an open mind for new ideas and approaches. – CSU instructor

Interested in Facilitating a College-wide, Departmental or Instructional Team-Teaching Squares Program?

The TILT team can help you get started! Please contact Tonya.Buchan@ColoState.Edu if your team would like to facilitate its' own Teaching Squares Program.

Resources

- Berenson, C. *Teaching Squares: Observe and Reflect On Teaching and Learning*. Calgary, AB: Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning at the University of Calgary, June 2017.
- Colorado State University. Teaching Effectiveness Framework. <https://tilt.colostate.edu/prodev/teaching-effectiveness/tef/>
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- Kirker, M., Oberlies, M., Hernandez, C., & DeWaay, S. (2021). Teaching Squares: Improving instruction through observation and self-reflection. *College & Research Libraries News*, 82(8), 370. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.82.8.370>
- Martin, G. A., & Double, J. M. (1998). Developing Higher Education Teaching Skills Through Peer Observation and Collaborative Reflection. *Innovations in Education and Training International*, 35(2), 161–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1355800980350210>
- Pacific Lutheran University, *Teaching Squares Participant Handbook*.
- Stonehill College. *Teaching Squares: Participant Handbook*.