



Teaching Squares Program

Program Description

Teaching Squares is a faculty development tool created by Anne Wessely from St. Louis Community College and used by many North American universities and colleges. This project developed in response to problems expressed about peer evaluations systems, namely, that they were critical and judgmental and tended to create a climate of defensiveness and suspicion.

As a contrast, the Teaching Squares approach involves a self-reflective process about teaching gained through observation of one's peers. It is not a peer evaluation exercise but rather a self-evaluation process which takes place in a confidential and mutually supportive environment. The aim of the Teaching Squares approach is to enhance teaching and learning through a structured process of classroom observation, reflection and discussion (leading to a plan for revitalization).

Program Mechanics

A square is formed by four instructors who visit each other's classes over the course of one term. Those being visited are encouraged to provide peer visitors with a copy of their course outline, to comment on why students are taking that particular course, and to share any material that would enhance the observation experience. The peer visitors are instructed to take notes during the classroom visit which would include such particulars as teaching methods, attitudes, classroom materials, and classroom management. The visits are preceded by an organizational meeting (that lays out expectations of behaviour and confidentiality and establishes a classroom visitation schedule) and the visits are followed by a debrief meeting where the participants share their experiences. The intention is that all discussion be from the point of view of the observer who identifies which teaching techniques worked for them and how they might be used to improve the observer's own teaching. By organizing the squares based on diversity of discipline, participants benefit from exposure to different teaching styles and techniques that may not commonly be used within their own discipline culture and it minimizes the distraction factor inherent in familiarity with course content. All Teaching Square activities are facilitated by the program coordinator who also sends out class visit and meeting reminders.

Program Takeaways

By allowing instructors to be "learners" again in their colleagues' classes, Teaching Squares opens up unique spaces for reflection and conversation about teaching. During their classroom visits, the Teaching Squares participants have the opportunity to experience a variety of contexts and challenges which leads to a greater appreciation of the quality of and commitment to good teaching already in existence on campus and, at the same time, it provides the catalyst for growth as participants gather ideas on different teaching approaches and consider how they could be used to improve one's own teaching.

If you are interested in learning more about the Teaching Squares Program at the University of Waterloo, please contact the program coordinator, Monica Vesely, at mvesely@uwaterloo.ca