

Teaching Squares Bring Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives

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I regularly hear colleagues complaining that they never have time to discuss teaching, and I know this is true in my liberal arts and sciences campus at this large research university. We devote so much of our time to teaching students, preparing classes, grading student work, and doing research that there's little time left to compare notes with our colleagues, even those next door. On those rare occasions when we do, it's often a pleasant surprise. Interesting teaching strategies are being implemented all around us. When this happens to me I often think, "I wish I could come see how you do that!"

What we don't seem to have are structures that facilitate these conversations and observations. Technology now makes possible international asynchronous conversations such as those on the *Teaching Professor Blog*. But we also need something that facilitates local, face-to-face conversations with others at our institution. At the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta, I think we have found a solution: teaching squares.

Teaching squares build the instructional abilities of teaching faculty. They were first developed by Anne Wesley at St. Louis Community College and have been used by many North American universities and colleges. We introduced them here at the Augustana Campus in 2009, and they've been running during most terms since.

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A teaching square consists of four faculty from different disciplines who visit each other's classes within a two-to-three-week period. After the classroom visits, the four gather around coffee or a meal to discuss the teaching observed. The intention of the square is not to criticize each other's teaching. Rather, it's to gather ideas on different teaching approaches that might be used in one's own class-

es. It's an opportunity for faculty to reflect on their own teaching in light of colleagues' teaching examples. Could I do something like that? Would that approach work with the content I teach? I might be able to use that, but what would I need to change so that it better fits with my teaching style? Are my students ready for a strategy like that? It's a constructive way to confront current teaching practices in light of some potential alternatives.

While I was associate dean of teaching from 2010 to 2013, the feedback I received from faculty who participated in the activity was positive. What they said was most helpful was simply having a structure that included time for discussion of teaching-related issues. Their exchanges usually started off with what they'd observed in each other's classes but often segued into analysis of the issues being faced by all of them in their courses.

I also think teaching squares are effective because they involve cross-disciplinary collaboration. The views and perspective of those who teach different kinds of content can be very helpful in providing new perspectives on the content being taught. In 2011, the University of Alberta's Festival of Teaching included a program where faculty could sign up and then visit different classes that had been opened for the festival. We had positive feedback about the opportunity to observe different teaching styles and strategies, but we also got constructive criticism that a valuable component was missing—the reflective conversation that typically follows in a formal teaching squares program. It's not always easy to schedule the four faculty needed for a square, but it's definitely worth the effort, given the value of these follow-up discussions.

Some participants have told us that they'd like to get evaluative feedback on their teaching. In the spirit of a teaching square, however, this cannot be one of its goals. The discussion of teaching needs to be free of evaluation and judgment. When exchanges become critical and personal, they can produce defensiveness and suspicion, and that would inhibit the open exchange of ideas and the free sharing of teaching strategies.

We continue to use teaching squares as part of our faculty development program at Augustana. I recommend the structure. If you can round up four colleagues, you can do a square on your own, or it might be something you could recommend to your teaching center or faculty development program.