

MAKING TEACHING COMMUNAL: PEER MENTORING THROUGH TEACHING SQUARES

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Teaching can often seem like an independent endeavor, and seeking out ways to engage in dialogue and exchanges surrounding teaching can be beneficial. Opportunities to observe peers' teaching and discuss teaching practices, challenges, and experiences with peers can lead to an increased sense of community, a fruitful exchange of ideas, and ultimately more thoughtful and effective teaching (Hendry and Oliver, 2012; Lemus-Martinez et al., 2021). One venue for such engagement is the teaching square, an exercise in which teachers observe each other's teaching practice, typically with the goal of self-reflection of one's own practice rather than evaluation of a peer performance. We suggest that even as the common philosophy behind teaching squares emphasizes self-reflection, they can also be catalysts for peer mentoring among participants. This article discusses teaching squares as a peer mentorship opportunity, drawing attention to the benefits of cultivating peer mentorship focused on teaching practices. We provide an account of our experience in undertaking a teaching square and the informal peer mentorship that resulted.

The teaching square is, briefly stated, an exercise in which teachers observe each other's teaching practice, typically with the goal of self-reflection on one's own teaching rather than an evaluation of peer performance, then follow up a meeting to discuss the observations (Haave, 2014). The authors of this paper undertook two teaching squares together. We adhered to the format and philosophy laid out in guides to teaching squares, with the principal aim being to use the observations to stimulate reflection of our own teaching practices (rather than evaluate or provide feedback on peers' performance). The teaching squares accomplished this goal; we have previously written about some of the specific benefits we reaped from the experience (Friedman et al., 2018). We noted that in addition to presenting opportunities to reflect on our teaching practices, observing each other's classes provided new insight on issues including the dynamics of interactions among students, the ways that the classroom space can impact teaching and learning, and the ways that students' learning profiles in our language classes affected learning.

In addition to the observations made through the classroom visits, we also benefited from the conversations that followed from debriefing, during which we discussed our observations and self-reflections, a process similar to that used in previous studies including Atkins et al. (2018) and Lemus-Martinez et al. (2021). Importantly, we see these types of conversations as being in line with the methods and goals of teaching squares as they have generally been understood. Discussions developed organically out of the debriefing sessions. This is not unique to our experience; others have also noted the emergence of such discussions out of teaching squares (Atkins et al., 2018; Haave, 2014; Lemus-Martinez et al., 2021). These discussions evolved into what can be seen as peer mentoring as it is defined by Hunt and Ellison (2010). Although we did

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not set out to form a teaching square with the goal of engaging in peer mentoring, we suggest that participants in teaching squares can intentionally form peer mentoring relationships that will emerge from the teaching square experience. We will discuss this in more detail later in the paper.

This paper first introduces the key practices, principles, and goals of teaching squares and highlights ways in which teaching squares can be useful in diverse teaching contexts. It then explains ways in which teaching squares can be venues for peer mentorship, connecting the approach and goals of teaching squares to those of peer mentoring. By way of illustrative example, we share aspects of our own teaching square experiences. Finally, we conclude with some suggestions for undertaking teaching squares with an eye toward building peer mentoring relationships.

What are Teaching Squares?

In any given academic institution, there can be many occasions and goals for classroom observations that involve peer evaluation or peer feedback. Teaching squares, on the other hand, are meant to spur self-reflection rather than function as a peer-evaluation instrument (Atkins et al., 2018; Lemus-Martinez et al., 2021). A teaching square can be defined as an initiative that has approximately four teachers who agree to undertake mutual observations of one another's classes, committing to use these classroom visits to inspire reflection on their own pedagogical practices, followed by meeting(s) to discuss their findings (Berenson, 2017).

Guiding Principles

Teaching squares are unique in offering classroom visits by peers free from peer-evaluation. The guiding principles of teaching squares are as follows (based on Berenson, 2017):

- Self-referential reflection: The teaching square is an opportunity for participants to be learners in their colleagues' classes.
- Confidential reciprocity: Through mutual classroom visits, teaching square participants assume the dual role of the observer and the observed.
- Appreciation: Teaching squares can be a conducive environment for reflections and conversations about teaching. Participants are encouraged to approach the process in a spirit of appreciation of the work of their colleagues.
- Mutual respect: Participants should view every classroom visit with an attitude of empathy and respect. It is important to recognize that different teaching methods can be adopted for different disciplines as well as different classroom situations.

Process

A teaching square normally consists of four faculty members who visit each other's classes over the course of an academic semester (Atkins et al., 2018). The initial meeting typically takes place at the beginning of the term and is dedicated to learning about the process and coordinating of schedules (Berenson, 2017). The observers have the option of attending their colleagues' classes individually or as a group. The process consists of five steps (adapted from North Virginia Community College CETL, 2015 and Berenson, 2017):

- Step 1. Initial meeting: This meeting is to gather together the participants of the square, set goals and expectations, and establish an observation schedule.
- Step 2. Prepare for observations: Colleagues share their course outlines and choose a focus or theme for the observations.
- Step 3. Classroom visits: Participants are encouraged to take brief notes of personal reflections on classroom set-up, student interaction and engagement during the classroom visits, and specific notes pertaining to the theme of the square.
- Step 4. Reflections: Participants document their reflective thoughts and observations after each class visit, in preparation for the final meeting.
- Step 5. Final meeting: Shortly after the classroom observations have been completed, the members meet again to share their experiences and reflections. Conversations centre around what the participants learned about their own teaching practice. Direct commentary about their colleagues' performance is avoided. In other words, the focus of the conversation is on what the observer learned, not providing feedback to the person who was teaching.

Benefits

The main purpose of the teaching square is to encourage a mutually respectful, appreciative, and supportive experience for the participants. The teaching square offers several benefits. These include the opportunity to (1) reflect on one's teaching practices, (2) build a constructive community of inquiry around teaching and learning, (3) see how peers implement teaching methods and strategies in their classrooms, (4) start conversations that help faculty grow in their teaching practices, and finally, (5) engage in reciprocal and mutually beneficial peer mentoring on teaching topics (Atkins et al., 2018; Lemus-Martinez et al., 2021).

When participants from varied disciplines participate in the teaching square, they benefit from learning about teaching approaches and techniques that may not commonly be used within their own discipline (Haave, 2018). On the other hand, when teaching squares are organized within a department, participants can also benefit from the opportunity to develop a strong sense of camaraderie and to increase dialogue around pedagogy and curricular issues as they pertain to a discipline (Colgan & DeLong, 2015; Lemus-Martinez et al., 2021). Teaching squares also have the advantage of being a sustainable, low-cost (or no cost) way of providing professional development that has pedagogical benefits (Shamshuck, 2015). The format is adaptable and flexible and can be utilized in fully online, in person, or hybrid delivery formats. An online format can also allow for participation across institutions and internationally (Atkins et al., 2018).

Teaching Squares and Peer Mentoring: Making the Connection

Peer mentoring has been defined as “a relationship in which a more experienced person assists a less experienced person to achieve desired outcomes,” and in which the mentor and mentee have a similar level of status (Hunt & Ellison, 2010, p. 192). Descriptions of peer mentorship have also emphasized that these relationships should be supportive and nonevaluative (Heinrich & Scherr, 1994), and that they benefit both mentor and mentee as well as foster collegial relationships (Hunt & Ellison, 2010). The term ‘mutual mentoring’ has been used to describe situations where there is not a clear distinction between senior and junior

members of the mentoring relationship (Harnish & Wild, 1994). The mutual mentoring model is attractive as it has the potential to weaken traditional power hierarchies that can be exclusionary and marginalizing, and instead construct a more inclusive and empowering form of mentoring relationship (Goerisch et al., 2018). While much of the existing research on mentoring focuses on dyadic mentorship, group mentoring has also been shown to have some distinct advantages, including facilitating strong relationships among peers (Pololi & Evans, 2015).

The relationships among members of a teaching square can take on many characteristics of unconventional mentoring relationships. In the case of colleagues participating in teaching squares, we suggest that there is often not a clear or formal relationship of mentor to mentee, so the concept of mutual mentoring is at play; indeed, each member may have some particular knowledge, experience, or expertise to contribute and share. One participant may be in a position to provide mentorship on how to encourage broader student participation, for instance, while another may be able to offer insight into effective ways of providing feedback to students or using classroom space in innovative ways.

While teaching squares are not usually designed specifically to function as peer mentoring opportunities—the sources we have cited so far suggest they are meant to be mainly self-reflection opportunities—we do not think that these two goals are in conflict with one another. In both cases, the focus of observations and discussions is not on evaluating others' teaching performance. Teaching squares can therefore be great venues for peer mentoring because they are non-judgmental and provide opportunities to observe others' teaching, model successful teaching strategies, ask about teaching strategies and techniques, and discuss teaching challenges. The atmosphere tends to be more constructive and welcoming of inquisitiveness, as opposed to one of criticism. In this way, the teaching square format positions participants as equals in mutual peer mentoring, and participants can provide commentary and share ideas based on their observations. Such sharing of ideas has the potential of being a multiway exchange and can be an extension of the teaching square as it has traditionally been designed. It does not conflict or stand in tension with any of the teaching squares' guiding principles.

Indeed, we see teaching squares as being especially well suited to peer mentoring about teaching practice, because mutual teaching observations and the conversations about them are prime opportunities to inspire change and professional growth through the sharing of ideas. Observing peers' teaching practice can be a great way of learning from others' teaching strengths. Because the teaching observations are non-evaluative, we found that the conversations following them tend to be relaxed, creative, supportive, and open. Non-evaluative observations also create a mindset of openness to noticing and becoming curious about other ways of teaching. These are ways in which we ourselves can learn and consider adopting (and adapting where appropriate) others' practices into our own teaching. Because the observations are reciprocal, there is the opportunity for a mutual exchange of ideas and learning.

Teaching Squares and Peer Mentoring: Our Experience

As faculty members who joined the University of Calgary at similar times, the authors have all taught language courses within the School of Languages, Linguistics, Literatures & Cultures (SLLLC). Our shared experiences motivated us to form a teaching square in two consecutive semesters. We have professionally benefited from deliberate self-reflection and mutual peer mentoring opportunities provided by this organic and valuable experience.

Often, the ways we teach can become habitual, and it can therefore be refreshing to gain new perspectives through observing different teaching methods and approaches. We found that observing one another's teaching inspired us and enriched our professional practice with fresh and effective pedagogical strategies. The subsequent discussions provided the opportunity to share insights and ask peers more about particular teaching strategies, activities, and moments that occurred during the observation. Our discussions allowed for peer mentoring to take place simultaneously as we undertook the reflection process. Insights garnered both from this reflection and the subsequent peer mentoring enriched our own classroom teaching.

To describe in more detail how this worked, a brief example from one of our teaching squares is provided to illustrate this. During one semester, the authors were all teaching classes that contained a mix of heritage language learners—learners who have proficiency in and/or cultural connections to the language due to being exposed to the language at home (Kelleher, 2010)—and second language learners—learners who typically begin learning the language in the classroom. These students had different learning profiles as well as different strengths and challenges in their learning. In the course of participating in the teaching square, we recognized a shared challenge in our teaching practices: identifying and applying effective ways to encourage active participation among all students in classes that included a mix of heritage learners and second language learners. Managing the classroom dynamics of such diverse classes can be difficult, and seeing how this functioned in our peers' language classrooms provided insight and a new perspective.

Being able to talk about this challenge together, and share ideas based on research and experience, was affirming and validating. This is also an example of how the teaching square provided us with the platform to identify shared issues, observe them, discuss them, and reflect upon them with others. We noticed in each other's classrooms a variety of ways to foster an inclusive learning atmosphere and to encourage student participation. For instance, an instructor can set up a classroom's physical space in particular ways to increase student engagement. Also, when initiating in-class activities, an instructor may choose to group students deliberately according to their learning profiles or other factors, depending on the activity and its goals. When one member of the square observed these strategies in use in another member's classroom, the observer brought up this observation during the debriefing session, and the colleague who had employed these strategies explained how they came to do so and how those strategies worked for them in their teaching. This sharing of ideas was reciprocal, as different strategies and ideas for discussion then emerged from different members' classroom experiences.

An atmosphere of constructive and open inquisitiveness grew over the course of our teaching squares. The format positioned us as equals, simultaneously mentoring and learning from each other. We followed the principles and best practices for conducting teaching squares and contributed and shared equally in the debriefing sessions, making time and giving space to voice and reflect on what we learned about our own teaching practice. Participating in teaching squares allowed us to expand our strategies, share and consolidate pedagogical knowledge, and develop collaborative relationships founded on mutual respect and support.

Establishing Teaching Squares for Peer Mentoring

As we have endeavoured to show, teaching squares can be rewarding, not only in the ways that are conventionally identified—that is primarily as catalysts for self-reflection on teaching—but also as supportive partnerships that can include and lead organically into mutual peer mentoring about teaching practice.

We would like to suggest some brief recommendations for readers who are interested in setting up teaching squares with a goal of mutual peer mentoring among participants. First, when setting up a teaching square, we recommend ensuring that it is made up of participants that all feel comfortable inviting one another to observe their teaching. Also, a teaching square that is comprised of participants at similar stages of their careers may be most conducive to peer mentoring relationships (e.g., all graduate students, mid-career instructors, etc.).

Secondly, we recommend having a conversation at the beginning of the teaching square initiative wherein the participants explicitly discuss and come to an agreement about expectations and procedures to use in carrying out their teaching square. Such a discussion might include ground rules for doing—and sharing learnings from—teaching observations, such as expectations of confidentiality and ways of demonstrating respect for other members of the teaching square and their classes. This is a good juncture at which to discuss the non-evaluative purpose of the observations and reflections. This discussion may also include the use of the teaching square as a peer mentoring opportunity, and the expectations and comfort level of participants regarding the form this peer mentoring could take. More specifically, the conversation could include an agreement that peer mentoring should be offered and received in a spirit of mutual respect and enthusiasm for exchanging teaching ideas.

Third, we would like to highlight the importance of continued clear communication throughout the experience. This includes clear communication with the students in the class that is being observed by members of the teaching square. For instance, we suggest that the instructor let students know that the observers are not there to judge them but rather to observe the instructor's teaching practice. In peer mentoring conversations that arise from experiences and discussions that are part of the teaching square, participants should take care to communicate clearly to ensure that the ideas they are sharing do not come across as criticism, evaluation, or unsolicited advice. At its best, peer mentoring in this context is a sharing of ideas and experience that is freely given and welcomingly received. Overt discussion of these matters is vital to ensuring that these criteria are met every step of the way.

When these recommendations are taken into account, teaching square participants set themselves up for a supportive, thought-provoking, and successful experience, and one that may be the start of enduring relationships of mutual mentoring and teaching inspiration.

Conclusion

We have built upon scholarly literature on peer mentoring and teaching squares, documenting and sharing our own experiences in this paper, and propose that teaching squares can be venues for developing mutual mentorship among their participants. Although scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and pedagogical research and guides have typically focused on the primary purpose of the teaching square as being a venue for self-reflection on teaching, we have suggested that it can also be an opportunity for peer mentorship. The philosophy underlying teaching squares and peer mentoring is conducive to this type of pairing, and our experience

confirms that in practice it can work well to use a teaching square as a place to develop peer mentoring relationships. We have also provided some suggestions for how to maintain a positive, constructive experience when using teaching squares in this way.

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