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Teaching Squares
Improving instruction through observation and self-reflection

Teaching information literacy is a mainstay of many academic librarians' roles. How are librarians—particularly those teaching in one-shots or embedded formats—developing their teaching skills? Teaching Squares offers an opportunity for librarians to improve instructional skills, through collaboration with their peers.

Developed at St. Louis Community College and popularized at Stonehill College, Teaching Squares offers instructors "an opportunity to gain new insight into their teaching through a nonevaluative process of reciprocal classroom observation and self-reflection."[1]

Based on peer observation, instructors reflect on their teaching practices to implement new strategies, teaching methods, or learning activities into their instruction. Ideally, a square is composed of four instructors from multiple disciplines across the university. Throughout a semester, the square members set goals, observe a class session of each member, reflect on their observations, and meet to share their reflections.

The structure of Teaching Squares, as applied to academic libraries, has unique benefits and challenges. This article will highlight how four libraries approached implementing this program: George Mason University, the University of Oregon, William and Mary, and the University of Houston.

George Mason University—Maoria J. Kirker

During the 2015-16 academic year, George Mason University Libraries piloted an instructional evaluation program for library instructors. This program consisted of two components: observations using a rubric by me, the instruction coordinator, and participation in a square. I wrote instructional evaluations based on a formal classroom observation and the library instructor's self-reflection from their square. This was a notable departure from the intent of Teaching Squares. Library administration also required the majority of library instructors to participate.

In its pilot year, Mason Libraries' Teaching Squares program had a traditional approach: four library instructors (a combination of faculty and staff) from various units and with different subject or functional expertise formed each square. Members of each square met to set goals, observed one

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another teach, held a follow-up meeting, and completed a self-reflection. While participants found scheduling observations challenging, there was overwhelming support for Teaching Squares.

The program evolved to meet the needs of library instructors. "Triangles" of three library instructors became a norm in order to alleviate scheduling issues. I formed squares based on shared instructional goals and differences in teaching styles. I extended the program to a full academic year. By the 2017-18 academic year, squares were encouraged to complete any shared instructional project and were not bound to classroom observations. These projects included creating and piloting assessment tools, developing lesson plans, and writing collaborative reflection journals.

The instructional evaluation process is now largely dismantled. However, Teaching Squares continue. Participants complete a project with their squares and write a self-reflection they submit to their direct supervisor. Today, the program is a part of the Libraries' Teaching Community of Practice.[2]

The program continues to evolve as we work remotely due to COVID-19 with the 2020-21 program fully virtual and under a new coordinator, David X. Lemmons. Projects include working on Blackboard learning modules, focusing on accessibility issues, and incorporating anti-racism pedagogy into library instruction. Additionally, the Mason Libraries' program was able to serve as an example and support the greater university's pilot program through the Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning's fall 2020 pilot.

University of Oregon—Sara DeWaay

University of Oregon Libraries (UOL) piloted Teaching Squares during the 2018-19 academic year. The group consisted of eight subject specialists. The squares intentionally separated librarians who already had close working relationships, while combining different levels of instruction experience. Observers used a three-column template to record the time, describe instructor and students actions, and write down personal reflections. Each participant met with their observer to define their goals, share their lesson plan, and highlight their hopes for feedback prior to the instruction session. Upon conclusion, participants chose if they would rather have a follow-up meeting with their observer or a write-up (or both).

Central to implementation at UOL was that the program was voluntary. The institutional culture of UOL is one where librarians mostly work alone to determine how to best support their departments. Except in a few instances, there was little precedent for instructional observation. The program needed to help us grow trust, create safe spaces, and establish communication guidelines to build stronger relationships. By asking, rather than requiring, folks to participate, the pilot focused on building a culture of reflection and peer support for those who were ready.

The flexibility of Teaching Squares made it possible to adjust to unforeseen challenges. Mary Oberlies, who was leading the program at UOL, left to pursue another position. However, with thorough documentation and the identification of another leader, the pilot continued. Midway through the year, one of the participants moved on to another university, and that square turned into a triangle. A group of three still allowed for self-reflection and learning, thus meeting goals of the program. These examples highlight the simplicity of Teaching Squares. All you need are a couple other librarians, a way to take notes, and a desire to learn from your peers through self-reflection.

The adaptability of Teaching Squares means it can be used in tandem with other evaluative processes. One of the librarians was working with another peer observation process called Classroom Observation Protocol for Information Literacy (COPIL). Through Teaching Squares, more librarians were introduced to COPIL, resulting in additional options for the type of information they received from observations. Teaching Squares makes it possible to combine self-

reflection and peer-learning with other institutional or personal needs.

UOL concluded the pilot year with a survey that showed that the program successfully encouraged self-reflection, connections between librarians, and opportunities to learn. Most importantly, everyone felt that the program was respectful, safe, and supportive. We also agreed that we gained insight into our own practices and that the program provided new opportunities to talk with colleagues about teaching. Furthermore, most of us learned new ideas for activities to use from observing our peers. Overall, the participants found the program to be worthwhile and beneficial.

William & Mary—Mary K. Oberlies

I joined William & Mary Libraries in fall 2018 and shared my experiences about Teaching Squares with our instruction coordinator. Within my department, Research & Instruction, a majority of our librarians were new hires and were interested in engaging in peer observation, cross-departmental collaboration, and expanding our teaching strategies. Our instruction team consists of teaching librarians across library units. We presented the Teaching Squares program to the team as an opt-in opportunity beginning fall 2019.

During the 2019-20 academic year, our pilot consisted of two squares and one triangle. Membership included one library staff, an undergraduate fellow, and nine instruction librarians with a range of teaching experience. We implemented our program following the same methods I used at the UOL and learned while participating in the program at Mason. Our square membership matched librarians and staff with varying teaching experience and styles to encourage peer learning and collaboration. Everyone was encouraged to identify a goal they wanted to achieve during the program and shared what classes would benefit from observation.

Like many other academic libraries, fall instruction is often heavily loaded early in the semester, which made it difficult for us to fully implement the program during fall 2019. None of our squares met until mid-October to discuss goals for the year, and by then we had few dates for observation. In response to this problem, we decided to try again in spring 2020. My square consisted of another instruction librarian and two library assistants. Within our square, I was able to observe one person, and two people were able to observe me.

Before teaching, we met with one another to talk about the class, our goals for the session, and what we wanted our colleague to look out for during the observation. Afterward, we met again to talk about the session: what went well, what we learned, and feedback on areas of concern.

William & Mary moved quickly to remote learning in early March 2020, which prevented us from continuing our program. Online teaching was a new experience for our team, and our time shifted towards meeting new demands from faculty and students. This adjustment led to putting Teaching Squares temporarily on the backburner.

Currently, our team is focused on developing online teaching strategies. Overall, the experiences of participants who were able to meet within their squares were positive, and there is interest in continuing Teaching Squares.

University of Houston—Carolina Hernandez

In 2019, I became instruction librarian at the University of Houston (UH) Libraries. One of the ideas I looked forward to implementing was Teaching Squares, which I had participated in during my time at UOL. While UH Libraries has an instruction team, teaching is not limited to those on the team. Most of our liaison librarians across all of the libraries provide instruction in a variety of capacities, though there has not been much cross-departmental collaboration in teaching. Teaching Squares seemed like a good opportunity to bring these librarians together to learn from their different approaches for their respective subject areas.

The pilot program at UH Libraries started in the fall 2019 semester and began with four squares. Voluntary participants represented a wide variety of subject and functional specialties, so a concerted effort was made to ensure that each square had a mix of individuals from different areas. As with other instances of Teaching Squares, the program offered a structured environment for librarians to observe the work of others and reflect on their own teaching. All groups met at least once to establish goals and expectations for the coming year, and many also decided to incorporate constructive feedback into the process in situations where individuals had any concerns with their own pedagogical approaches.

At the end of the first semester, I surveyed participants to gain a better sense of participation, but also to identify any components of the program that might need adjusting before the start of the spring 2020 semester. About half of the participants were able to find time to either observe or be observed in one of their instruction sessions, if not both. Those who participated reported largely positive experiences, with many stating that the observations made them more cognizant of things like pacing and how they engage students in discussions. Those who had yet to participate in observations mentioned either not having the time in their schedule to observe someone else or not having taught an appropriate instruction session for someone to observe. However, all participants still had plans to continue with the program in the spring.

While the spring 2020 semester started off according to plan, the coronavirus pandemic ultimately put the program on hold as all participants shifted to working from home. There was some initial interest in finding a way to continue Teaching Squares for online classes, but the focus of UH Libraries' instruction shifted to asynchronous content instead. We hope to resume the program when we return to in-person teaching.

How to build your program

Based on our experiences building Teaching Squares programs, we offer the following advice to those interested in implementing one of their own:

• Consider your institutional culture and what approach will best support/build trust among your instructional staff. Are people more likely to embrace a program that is compulsory or voluntary? Participation in Teaching Squares should not feel punitive.

• Administrative support is key. If you are not the direct supervisor of all instructional staff, you will want to get buy-in from supervisors and department heads.

• Ensure the program is crafted with flexibility by making various parts of the process optional. Don't rely on the squares to have their own meetings. Facilitate a larger group meeting for all participants, especially at the start and conclusion of the year.

• Build awareness for the program by hosting an information session prior to soliciting participants.

• Check in with participants throughout the year to assess progress. Things get busy, so this can also serve as a helpful reminder for squares to observe each other and meet.

The Teaching Squares program provides a flexible way for librarians to reflect on and improve their teaching through peer observation. Implementing it successfully depends on thoughtful consideration of your institutional context and adjusting the program as needed. At each of our libraries, we were able to cultivate buy-in and participation, which was critical to its success. Beyond that, our implementations varied, and what worked for us might not work for you.

We encourage you to modify the Teaching Square program to fit your institution and build a culture of collaboration and reflection around teaching and learning.

Notes

1. See https://stonehill-website.s3.amazonaws.com/files/resources/participant-handbook-08-09.pdf, p. 3.

2. See https://library.gmu.edu/learning/teachingsquares.