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Teaching Squares: Crossing New Borders

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Abstract

Teaching Squares is a teaching development initiative that brings instructors together in small groups to observe one-another's classes and reflect on their experiences in a non-judgmental, supportive environment (University of Waterloo, n.d.). Durham College, the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT), and a key industry partner, Ontario Power Generation (OPG), have partnered on a Teaching Squares initiative, enabling primarily face-to-face discussions amongst instructors at all three institutions. Despite positive feedback and minimal time demands, building faculty enrollment and involvement remains challenging to engage instructors across various disciplines, fields, and delivery formats.

In the fall 2017 semester, a professor teaching in a fully online program enrolled in Teaching Squares, participating completely online. Although the significance of peer observation to support teaching in an online environment is well documented (Bennett & Santy, 2009; Swinglehurst, et al., 2008), there were logistical challenges, including arranging recordings of face-to-face classes for the online professor to observe, and involving the professor in face-to-face discussions amongst program participants. Despite the challenges, this experience inspired discussion about how Teaching Squares may be piloted in a fully online format. This paper and presentation will continue this discussion, extending it to the possibilities of expanding enrollment to international partners to promote the exchange of ideas across institutional and geographical borders and to provide more diversity of perspectives on Teaching and Learning in a digital context.

Keywords: faculty development, Teaching Squares, peer observation of teaching, institutional partnerships

Teaching Squares: Crossing New Borders

Peer observation of teaching is a recognized and well documented practice of faculty or teaching development programming at various higher education institutions (e.g., Buskist, Ismail, & Groccia, 2014; Mueller & Shroeder, 2018). One established program for peer observation of teaching in some North American higher education institutions is the Teaching Squares program, originally created by Anne Wessely from St. Louis Community College (Haave, 2014). In the Durham Region in Ontario, Canada, three partner institutions – Durham College of Applied Arts and Technology (DC), the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT), and Ontario Power Generation (OPG) – often collaborate on the delivery of the Teaching Squares program to provide instructors from the three institutions an opportunity to observe and facilitate discussion about teaching and learning, and to reflect on their own teaching methodology and practices. Instructors from different disciplines are organized into small groups of four and encouraged to visit and observe, for a minimum of an hour and over a short period of time, the classroom environment for each of the three group members. The intention of the short period of time and small groups is two-fold. The first is pragmatic -- the teaching schedule for instructors often changes from term to term thus managing the opportunity to visit three others' classrooms can be much less challenging when structured over a shorter period of time. Haave (2014) identifies providing a structured opportunity for instructors to discuss with their colleagues as significant to their participation. The second, although also pragmatic, stresses the importance of the integration of incremental and measured modification to practices and teaching strategies. With the intention of the Teaching Squares program to provide instructors with an opportunity to reflect on their own practice and pedagogical style,

encouraging the integration of new and/or enhanced practices and strategies through a measured approach supports the instructor.

In the fall 2017 offering of the program, a professor who teaches fully online in the UOIT Faculty of Education enrolled in the program. It became evident at this point that, in most instances, instructors teaching face-to-face courses enrolled in the program; however, fully online and hybrid (blended) courses are offered at both UOIT and DC. This opportunity, although welcomed, presented a number of logistical challenges, and also inspired thought regarding a number of possibilities that may be enabled by offering a fully online version of the program.

This paper and presentation will begin with a brief introduction of some of the literature on peer observation of teaching, including online peer observation of teaching; introduce the current format of the shared UOIT/DC/OPG Teaching Squares program; share insight from two participants of the fall 2017 offering of the program; and lastly, explore future possibilities for Teaching Squares. A goal of this presentation is to engage in dialogue with colleagues at each of the institutions represented at the Universal Design for Learning and Higher Education in Transformation (UDHEIT) Congress 2018 regarding ideas for the future of peer observation of teaching in various contexts and through different modes of delivery.

Exploring the Literature on Peer Observation of Teaching

This section briefly explores the literature on peer observation of teaching in higher education, including literature on general benefits and challenges of peer observation and various approaches to peer observation of teaching, including existing examples of online peer observation of teaching in the higher education context.

General benefits of peer observation of teaching. The opportunity to observe other's teaching practices which may be implemented in one's own teaching practice is one of the benefits of peer observation of teaching. In a study involving 36 faculty and instructors who engaged in non-evaluative peer observation of teaching at a Canadian institution, Mueller and Schroeder (2018) found that the majority of participants reported that they were likely to either implement practices they observed, or, update the existing strategies they had already been using. Having the opportunity to observe and, by extension, the opportunity to learn through observing peers' teaching, perhaps even more than having the opportunity to receive feedback, may be a significant factor of peer observation of teaching (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008; Swinglehurst, Russell & Greenhalgh, 2008). The observer, however, is not necessarily the only benefactor from this type of initiative – instructors who are observed, observers, and students may all benefit from the process and outcomes of peer observation of teaching (Donnelly, 2007; Buskist, Ismail, & Groccia, 2014).

How might this translate as a benefit for online instructors? Swinglehurst, Russell & Greenhalgh (2008) suggest peer observation of teaching may be applicable to educators who teach in various delivery formats, including face-to-face and online. They argue that instructors of courses in blended/hybrid formats could also be included in peer observation of teaching initiatives. Baran and Correia (2014) claimed that “Observing and constructively critiquing other online instructors’ courses helps faculty members visualize their own online teaching practices and develop their strategies for online teaching” (Baran & Correia, 2014, p. 100).

Lastly, another notable benefit of peer observation of teaching is the minimal amount of resources required to run and participate in this type of program. Mueller and Schroeder (2018)

commented on the “low-cost, low-investment” nature of this type of initiative which may make it appealing to other institutions.

Challenges of peer observation of teaching. Despite the minimal resources required, peer observation of teaching is not without its challenges. Buskist, Ismail and Groccia (2014) state that “the peer review process is ultimately only as effective as the individuals who actually conduct peer review” (p. 50). This may, however, be a matter of perception and the focus of the peer observation program. For instance, the emphasis of peer observation in the Teaching Squares program is not about improving another instructor’s teaching practice but, rather, to engage in self-reflection on teaching and learning. It does, however, suggest a commitment from participants to be actively engaged in all parts of the process is necessary.

Another challenge associated with peer observation of teaching is that it may result in feelings of anxiety regarding the observation and feedback components (Swinglehurst, Russell & Greenhalgh, 2008). Being open to welcoming peers to one’s class can be nerve-wracking and involves a certain level of vulnerability. On the other hand, Bell and Mladenovic (2008) shared anecdotally that some experienced instructors may be hesitant to engage in observation of teaching with less experienced instructors due to the concern that they may intimidate their less experienced peers (2008). For example, Ernest and Hopkins (2006) explained that instructors at their institution were more likely to engage in peer observation in colleagues’ courses, though not necessarily in those of more experienced educators.

A related challenge that seems to extend beyond the DC, UOIT and OPG context is that instructors do not always take full advantage of peer observation of teaching programming. The specific model or approach to peer observation of teaching that is used can influence participants’ experiences. Swinglehurst, Russell and Greenhalgh (2008) found through focus

group discussions about peer observation of teaching that observations that were evaluative in nature were not necessarily perceived by participants as having supported their learning.

Approaches to peer observation of teaching. Approaches to peer observation of teaching vary. Gosling (2002) organized observation of teaching models into three main categories: management or evaluation, development, and peer review. Additionally, there are examples of more or less structured models to peer observation of teaching. An example of a less structured approach to peer observation of teaching, are “open” peer observation programs in the literature. Mueller and Shroeder (2018) refer to an initiative held at a Canadian university called “Open Classroom Week” as *non-evaluative peer observation of teaching* (p. 2). The Open Classroom Week initiative involved award-winning faculty from the institution to “open the doors” to faculty and staff to observe their classes during a specific week in the fall semester. Similarly, Ernest and Hopkins (2006) described an “open-door policy” to welcome peer observation of online English language courses at a Spanish university (p. 557) which included the ability of the observers to provide feedback and support in a reciprocal manner.

Bennett and Santy (2009) shared what may be viewed as a hybrid approach to online peer observation of teaching whereby participants (two colleagues from different departments) began meeting face-to-face to discuss their respective online teaching contexts and challenges. Both colleagues were interested in action learning which is reciprocal in nature. Bennett and Santy viewed each other’s online courses and provided feedback via email and in-person (2009).

With regard to more structured approaches to peer observation of teaching, Buskist, Ismail and Groccia (2014, p. 34) outline what they refer to as a “Practical Model of Peer Review” which includes a pre-observational meeting, classroom observation, the development of a written report, and a post-observational meeting to provide feedback. The classroom

observation component involves a conversation with students in the group and a detailed observation form which includes a five-point rating scale for each item. Donnelly (2007) described a similar model provided in a postgraduate certificate program for staff and faculty at an Irish institution. The model used in that program involved a pre-observation meeting, followed by a teaching observation, concluded by a feedback discussion.

The Teaching Squares program at DC, UOIT and OPG falls somewhere between the less structured and more structured approaches mentioned above and will be outlined in more detail later in this paper.

The Shared UOIT-DC-OPG Teaching Squares Program

Teaching Squares is currently offered in the fall and winter semesters at DC and UOIT. Depending on the ability to provide support from an institutional perspective, the program may also include OPG instructors. Individuals in faculty/training development roles from each institution serve as facilitators of the program. This normally includes a representative from the Centre for Academic and Faculty Enrichment (CAFE) at Durham College, the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) at UOIT, and the Training and Development Department from one of OPG's learning sites.

Full-time and part-time instructors at the participating institutions are invited (primarily via email and newsletter communications) to register for Teaching Squares near the start of each semester. Upon registration, participants enter their teaching schedule information in a shared spreadsheet (currently using Google Sheets) to assist in placing participants in "squares" (i.e., groups of preferably four instructors with complementary teaching schedules). Table 1 below outlines the general schedule for the Teaching Squares program. This format is repeated in the winter semester.

Table 1- Fall Semester Timeline (*Teaching Squares Handbook for Participants*, 2017, p. 5)

Fall Semester Milestone Dates		
Milestone dates	Activity	Milestone events
Early October	All Squares Kick Off Square meeting	Meet all Teaching Square participants Meet with Square partners Schedule Square visits
Early October – November	Class visit 1 Class visit 2 Class visit 3	Visit to Square partners (total of 3 visits) Organize materials for visiting partner Record observations
Late November	Time for Self-Reflection Square Share	Analyze observations Prepare for your Square Share Share personal, positive observations with Square Partners
Early December	All Squares Celebration	Share Square reflections and observations at Dinner Celebration gathering

Upon registration, participants are provided with the *Teaching Squares Handbook for Participants* in electronic format distributed via email. In the most recent delivery, a Google Drive folder has also been shared with participants which contains the handbook and supplementary resources, including teaching observation and reflection tools, literature on providing effective feedback, and a video summary of the key program details.

The program facilitators place participants in groups and invite all participants to a kick-off meeting which is intended to provide an introduction to the program structure and expectations; set the tone for a supportive, non-judgmental experience; and provide participants the opportunity to meet their group members (their “square”) and begin scheduling visits to one

another's classes. The program is an example of non-evaluative peer evaluation of teaching. Participants have the option to indicate if they would like to receive feedback on specific aspects of their teaching; although reflection sheets are provided to help focus observations, the program facilitators emphasize that this is not an evaluative exercise but an opportunity for self-focused reflection.

In the fall 2017 and winter 2018 semesters, a web conferencing option was made available to participants who could not attend the kick-off meeting. This also provided the ability to record the meetings and distribute the participants for review at a later date. In the fall 2017 semester, the option to log into the meeting virtually was only selected by the fully online participant, referred to as Author 2. Author 2 was able to participate fully in the discussion, using text-chat and audio, in addition to being able to see in-person attendees, and to be seen by in-person attendees during the meeting. Following the general ice-breaker and program introduction, participants engaged in small group discussions with their own square members. In this case, a laptop that was running the Adobe Connect web conferencing software was provided to the instructors in the online professor's square to support direct communication. This also provided the square members with an opportunity to become familiar with the software prior to its use during their observation.

In the weeks following the kick-off meeting, the facilitators keep in touch with each square via email to ensure that all participants have been in touch with their square members; communicate reminders regarding timing and expectations (i.e., all participants should visit each of their square members at least once for a minimum of one hour); and offer support scheduling visits and informal debrief meetings. In most years, participants of the program arranged their own informal debrief meeting, which is an opportunity to share self-focused reflections and

celebrate the great things that have been observed or gleaned through the classroom observations. In fall 2017, an “All Squares Debrief” (intended to bring all program participants together to reflect as a larger group) was requested by some of the participants in the kick-off meeting, and the program facilitators arranged a time and place for that discussion to take place. Only three participants attended but it was an engaging discussion. Due to conflicting schedules, as indicated by a poll that went out to participants, the All Squares Debrief was not scheduled in the winter 2018 semester. It is important to note that maintaining scheduling flexibility is an important component of the Teaching Squares program. This is to enable more individuals with busy teaching schedules to participate.

Following the completion of all classroom visits, program participants are asked to complete a brief reflection on their experiences in the program. Example guiding questions, included below, are provided in the *Teaching Squares Handbook for Participants* (2017; pp. 9 - 10):

- *What was the most surprising thing you learned by participating in the Teaching Squares program?*
- *What three words best describe your learning experience in the Teaching Squares program?*
- *How would you describe your feelings/reactions to your experience of participating in the Teaching Squares program?*
- *What is one thing you learned by participating in the Teaching Squares program that will impact your teaching practice?*
- *How will you use what you learned in the Teaching Squares program?*

The facilitators emphasize that, not only does this serve as a form of formative feedback that is of value to the facilitators, it can also serve as an artifact for a teaching dossier. Participants are encouraged to create their reflections in any format that would be most meaningful to them (written, video, audio, images, etcetera). For the most part, essay-style reflections have been submitted; however, one participant in a recent offering of the program submitted a poem with images to represent her experiences.

Concluding the Teaching Squares program, all participants are invited to attend an informal celebration dinner which is usually held at a training restaurant at Durham College. This is an ideal place to meet as many of the individuals who prepare and serve the food are students of the college. Prior to the celebration dinner, squares are asked to choose a spokesperson, in order to summarize their square members' experiences. However, in recent semesters, the celebration dinner has been a more free-flowing, organic discussion. This may also be due, in part, to somewhat smaller numbers of participants in attendance at the celebration dinner in comparison to previous years. Overall, the celebration dinner is intended to provide all participants the opportunity to reflect on the program, chat about the challenges and successes of teaching with others in similar roles, and receive a certificate of participation. Participants are encouraged to enroll in the program again in the future and are asked to offer their feedback on the program.

In general, the Teaching Squares program is not difficult to facilitate and offers scheduling flexibility to participants. Matching participants with peers who have complementary teaching schedules, and taking into account various delivery formats are two of the main challenges in the coordination of the program. Overall, it is not intended to be onerous or as regimented as other common faculty/training development initiatives. It serves as an opportunity

for instructors from a range of disciplines and industries to gain new insights, make new connections, engage in reflection, and build their networks.

In the following sections, perspectives from two participants of the fall 2017 DC-UOIT-OPG Teaching Squares program will be shared, beginning with a UOIT professor's online experiences in the program, followed by an OPG training specialist's experiences.

A UOIT Professor's Experiences as an Online Teaching Squares Participant

Author 2

For several years, I observed sadly that my university's teaching and learning centre offered a program called Teaching Squares. Sadly, because the format for the program consisted of classroom observations and face-to-face discussions. Oh, you need to know that I teach online. Committing to travel to campus to observe colleagues was not possible for me and participating in online discussions was often a challenge for some other faculty. I thought the program offered an opportunity to learn from colleagues while sharing some of what I had learned over the years, but I couldn't play. To quote Mr. Trump, "sad."

In the fall of 2017 I bit the bullet and proposed to participate with campus colleagues, suggesting that they could join my synchronous online conferenced class meetings and that the media centre might be persuaded to make video recordings of their classes to share with me. The teaching and learning centre then had only to make those arrangements and find three colleagues who were willing to engage in online visits, video-based observations, and online discussions. I figured the odds of this proposal being accepted were infinitesimal. However, as I point out in research courses, a small probability does not indicate that an event will not occur, but rather that it **will**, but rarely. So, it was a rare pleasure for me to participate in the Teaching Squares program.

Only two of my partners were able to sit into my classes and neither had experience with Adobe Connect, the virtual classroom software we use in the Faculty of Education. I met with them in Adobe Connect to demonstrate how it enabled video and audio conferencing, the sharing of informative documents, and small group discussion in virtual “breakout rooms.” I let my students know we would be having visitors and that they would be there to observe me and to make suggestions to me re: teaching improvement. I asked that they let me know if they objected (none did) and to make the visitors feel at home.

After a short period for general questions about course content or assignments, my typical class consists of a short PowerPoint presentation by me focusing on key ideas or facts in the readings the students have done in the previous week. There may be some open discussion in response to questions about the content and then I ask the students to move into breakout rooms where they will be asked to address questions about a problem or a case study that I have provided for them (sometimes this is the same in all rooms, sometimes different cases are addressed in each room). After a time, we regroup in the “main room” and share our observations and the ways in which the information in the readings and the presentation have been used in the problem solving strategies of each group. Sometimes it is possible to do a second breakout session. Sometimes I have a second PowerPoint presentation. We close with reminders for next week’s work.

When my Teaching Squares colleagues entered this environment, I invited them to ask any questions they wished in the large group, to contribute to discussions based on their own experiences, and to enter one or more of the breakouts to observe, and engage in the small group discussions, if they so chose. The single most striking thing about this experience for me was that my colleagues quickly engaged themselves with the students and the course content. Their

contributions were sought and valued by the students. I think this was a function of the course content—principles of learning—and demographic characteristics of the group with 30-40% of the class being postsecondary instructors. That is, my colleagues found themselves in collegial discussions with my students.

After the observations, my colleague and I engaged in a debriefing discussion that tended to focus on the potential of virtual classes for both distance delivery and on-campus classes. I sought, and got, suggestions for what might have been done better, but if my experience is characteristic, the value of being in a Teaching Square is not in the specific suggestions the participants give one another but in the opportunity to engage in a serious discussion about teaching and learning in a specific environment with a knowledgeable colleague. In retrospect, I should have expected this since it is essentially the same thing I seek for my students with the breakout room discussions.

Arranging to observe my campus colleagues was a more difficult challenge. Getting a good quality video and sound in a lecture hall proved challenging and none of the rooms were equipped with microphones at student desks. Likewise, it was not possible for me to have a sense of what might be happening in small group work. Still, in the post lesson debriefing, one of my colleagues had a variety of questions that led to an interesting discussion and my committing to send some resources and ideas that might help to address her concerns. Again, the collegial dialogue was the valuable part of the process.

A Training Specialist's Experiences Observing a Fully Online Teaching Squares Participant

Author 3, a Training Specialist, Training Change and Control at Ontario Power Generation (OPG) participated in the same Teaching Square as Author 2 and gave her permission to share some of her reflections as an industry partner. In her end-of-program written reflection, she shared a number of positive insights regarding her overall experience, and her interest in the virtual classroom environment that she was able to experience in the program. She commented on the potential to use virtual classrooms for onboarding and leadership training, as just two examples, in order to minimize time away from the workplace, while also supporting learning about pedagogy. Of her overall impression of the possibilities enabled through Author 2's synchronous, online class, Author 3 writes:

The virtual classroom was facilitated masterfully with full participation by local and international students alike. I was given a list of course dates and times along with readings through the Adobe Connect... The virtual classroom consisted of a Blackboard, Break Out Rooms, Video links, and opportunity for typed and spoken discussion, which was all recorded and posted on the URL site... The innovation of this virtual teaching environment allowed the instructor to manage his class like a pilot. It provided participants a safe diverse work group, making the experience more engaging and enjoyable for all.

Furthermore, experiencing the “joy and confusion” of being a student, an aspect of the Teaching Squares program that is emphasized in the kick-off meeting, is also evident in Author 3's reflection. Candidly recounting her introduction to Author 3's class in Adobe Connect, Author 3 adds:

When I logged on, I immediately noticed that the other participants' pictures were motionless yet mine was bouncing all over the place as I moved... someone quickly instructed me by name: "[Author 3], you just hit the button to freeze your picture." I immediately felt a bond with the group and part of the class, who apparently had all experienced the same their first time in the virtual classroom. [Author 2] started with an introduction and asked me to share a little about my training background and where I work. From then on, I was a part of the class and enjoyed it thoroughly.

The connections with other instructors that were forged through this partnership were also of value to Author 3. As the only participant from OPG in this offering of the program, she commented on the importance of making this available to more people in her role in her recommendations for future offerings of the program.

Future Possibilities for the Teaching Squares Program

There may be an interest in a fully online Teaching Squares group among the partner institutions mentioned in this paper. Following the completion of the winter 2018 semester offering of Teaching Squares, an anonymous evaluation form was sent to all twenty participants of the fall 2017 and winter 2018 offerings. Eight participants responded. Of the eight participants who responded, most indicated that they would be interested in participating in an online Teaching Squares group (for online and blended/hybrid courses). Author 2 suggested that it may be worthwhile to consider running an online pilot of the Teaching Squares program in his home Faculty. He teaches in a fully online program and there may faculty in his and other programs who might be interested in participating.

Another option may be to promote the option of opening a fully online “square” within an upcoming offering of the Teaching Squares program also open to instructors of face-to-face courses. This may require some targeted marketing, in order to attract a group of online instructors. Given the affordances of a few technologies that are currently available at UOIT and DC – including Adobe Connect and MediaSite (a lecture capture service) – with some careful planning, creativity, and enough interest from instructors who teach online, introducing an online square or fully online Teaching Squares offering should be possible. Furthermore, a focus group discussion around online peer observation of teaching revealed the suggestion that peer observation of teaching in the online format may not even need to take place in real-time (Swinglehurst, Russell & Greenhalgh, 2008). As such, online peer observation of teaching may provide more flexibility than the face-to-face format. Furthermore, teaching and learning professionals and advocates interested in the possibilities enabled by online peer observation of teaching may want to heed Bennett and Santy’s advice: “Peer observation of the online teaching/learning process must not merely replicate the traditional use of peer observation of classroom teaching but capitalise on the additional opportunities it offers” (2009, p. 404).

In the corresponding presentation at the Universal Design and Higher Education in Transformation Congress 2018, the authors intend to gain insight from attendees from all represented institutions to learn more about a) what other institutions are doing in terms of peer observation of teaching in general; b) what existing programs are in place to facilitate peer observation of teaching online; and c) whether there is an interest in exploring international opportunities for peer observation of teaching.

Conclusions

There are benefits of engaging in peer observation of teaching and, providing such an initiative can be less time- or resource-intensive than other faculty development programming in general. The Teaching Squares program explored in this paper is relatively straightforward from a facilitation perspective and offers the ability to expand one's teaching network and celebrate good practices in Teaching and Learning with peers both within the same institution and at partner institutions. Despite characterizing the program as relatively flexible and minimally demanding program for the participants, challenges still remain with regard to recruiting participants (particularly those who have never experienced the program), matching participants with complementary teaching schedules, and effectively including more instructors who teach primarily online. As exemplified in the fall 2017 offering of the program, and described by the authors who had first-hand experiences either participating as a fully online instructor or observing a fully online class, the coordination involved in facilitating peer observation of teaching are not insurmountable. In fact, there may be more opportunities for peer observation (facilitated by the recording) and opportunities for more members of the teaching community to engage in peer observation of teaching; and perhaps most importantly, dialogue with peers in similar roles, if the logistical challenges are addressed. The authors are interested in exploring ideas regarding the potential for this type of initiative to expand further, across institutional and international borders, using technology that is currently available. Imagine the possibilities that may be enabled by the development of international communities of practice, engaged in dialogue inspired by peer observation of teaching, without needing to purchase a plane ticket.

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