



Teaching Squares at UW Tacoma: How Cross-Disciplinary Peer Observations Improve Teaching

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The "Problem"

Teaching observations serving as performance evaluations may lead to anxiety and be perceived as busywork rather than professional development. We present a program using non-evaluative peer observations to improve teaching and student performance through group discussions and reflections of participating faculty.

Teaching Squares at UWT: Why?

The Teaching Squares program at the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) is a community of faculty dedicated to improving their teaching practices through a structured, non-evaluative process of classroom observation and shared reflection.

The following outcomes guide our voluntary program:

- 1) Re-energize one's teaching,
- 2) Reflect on one's own teaching practices,
- 3) Share cross-disciplinary pedagogical perspectives,
- 4) Build a community,
- 5) Create collaborative connections with faculty members in other disciplines,
- 6) Nurture and support ideas for scholarship in teaching and learning.

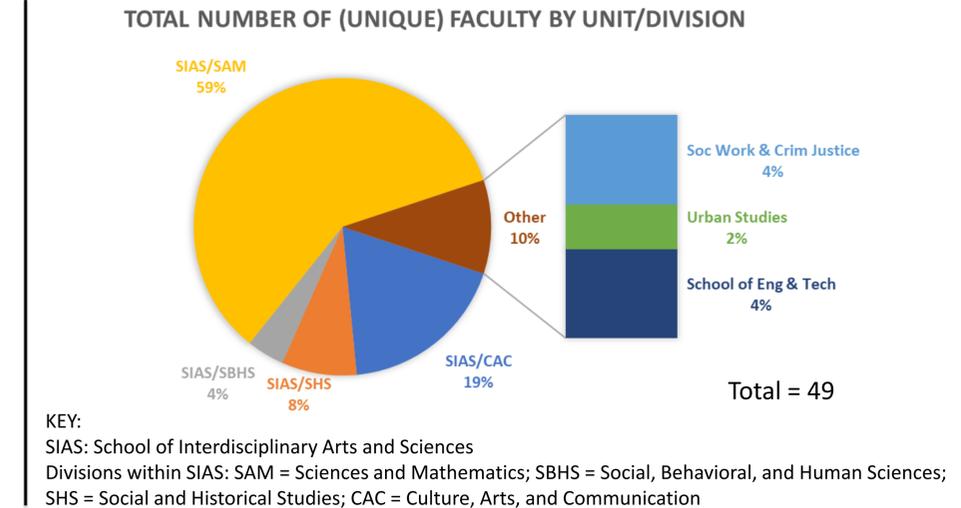
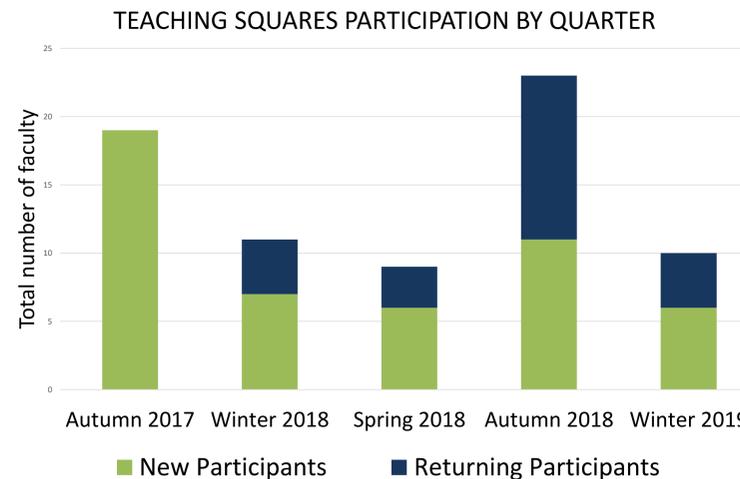
Teaching Squares at UWT: How Does It Work?

- Four cross-disciplinary faculty with compatible teaching schedules observe their square mates, typically by the end of week 5.
- Small group meeting with the square and/or with individual square mates.
- One meeting with the Teaching Squares community (post-observations) to share ideas, feedback, reflections, and kudos.
- Zero judgments or evaluation letters, unless square mates agree and make appropriate arrangements.

References

Teachers Observing Teachers: A Professional Development Tool for Every School
https://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin297.shtml

Teaching Squares at UWT: Who Are We?



Faculty Reflections and Kudos

"I came away with a newfound respect for the varied fields and disciplines our students navigate every day." - Andrea Modarres

"Every time I have a visitor to the classroom, it reminds me to look at my lesson plan from the point of view of the students: what will they be doing, minute to minute? If there is ever a stretch of time where the answer to that question is 'sitting and listening to lecture', I know I need to interject more active learning. So, while Teaching Squares is not an evaluative process it does encourage me to self-evaluate, and improve." - Heather Heinz

"The realities of group dynamics are crucial and having time to just observe them (without other obligations) helps me think about managing them better." - Cynthia Howson

"Through Teaching Squares I observed and then discussed new pedagogical techniques that could possibly work for my own classes. I also really appreciate all the informal feedback from my peers!" - Haley Skipper

"It was interesting see group conversations/work groups in action. I learned the variety of ways it can look, sound, etc., when students are working on a problem that genuinely engages and challenges them." - LeAnne Laux-Bachand

How Does Teaching Squares Improve Teaching?

As a result of their participation in Teaching Squares, faculty

- incorporate new teaching methods to promote equity and inclusion,
- come away with new appreciation of other disciplines and fellow faculty,
- find new ways to engage their own students,
- are part of a growing community of faculty who celebrate good teaching.

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Teaching Squares at UWT: Conclusions and the Future

Many thanks to all of the participating faculty for their time and feedback. We had many faculty return to Teaching Squares for several subsequent quarters and are thrilled to include faculty from units across the UWT campus. Through observation and reflection, Teaching Squares can not only promote constructive pedagogical innovation, but also mitigate bias between faculty by thinking of teaching methods in terms of self-identified goals and areas for growth. Formal peer evaluations, on the other hand, naturally incorporate bias on the part of the observing faculty member. We are working on a report on how self-reflection of teaching may be incorporated into a formal teaching portfolio and factor in to promotion and tenure packages. This conversation is underway in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at UWT.