ASCILITE 2025
Future-Focused:
Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Knowledge translation and dissemination: Teaching squares

Joanne Harmon, Kathy Darzanos, Tanya Weiler, Amanda Bridgewater, Jordana Maio, Veronica Tziavrangos, Rupinder Kaur, Angela Brown
University of South Australia

This presentation will outline the implementation and dissemination of a Teaching Squares approach with a focus on enhancing academic learning (sessional staff and continuing), collegiality, and networking across all seven academic units within the University of South Australia (UniSA). We identified that the Teaching Squares approach was a safe and valuable approach for continuing staff to view, meet, reflect, and ideate on their teaching while observing their colleagues from the same academic unit. Based on these positive findings garnered through questionnaires and focus group interviews, we now wish to extend this study to include sessional staff, a cohort of teaching staff that are under-represented in the literature concerning Teaching Squares support. We will outline how we developed a community of practice to include staff across all academic units. We then purposely connected a maximum of four staff from different units so that we can further determine the benefits of staff learning and networking while viewing and interacting with colleagues from distinct and unique disciplines. Through a combination of pre-and post-questionnaires, we collected data on staff perceptions, experiences, and learnings through the Teaching Squares approach. More detailed data was then obtained through focus group interviews. The outcomes of these findings and this project has the potential to greatly enhance sessional and continuing staff belonging, reflective practice and networking, which will result in enhanced teaching practice and student learning.

Keywords: teaching squares, reflection, higher education, academics

Teaching Squares brings together higher education academics to observe each other's teaching and reflect collaboratively in a supportive, non-judgemental environment. Despite its fundamentally performative nature, university teaching typically occurs behind closed doors and without meaningful observation or professional dialogue (Berenson, 2017). This isolation perpetuates outdated practices, limits innovation, and prevents the development of pedagogical expertise that could significantly enhance student learning outcomes. Peer review of teaching is known to be confrontational (even when undertaken as a formative process) and has the potential to be mis-used within an audit culture as compliance with a meaningless checklist. Teaching Squares confront this challenge by reimagining peer review as developmental and reflective, rather than a performance evaluative process. Moreover, Teaching Squares directly support the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TEQSA]. (2017) domain 3 requirement for staff engagement in continuing scholarship to inform and improve teaching practice.

In a typical Teaching Square, academics form a small group and take turns observing one another's teaching activities. The process intentionally provides a safe environment to reflect on teaching practice. This small group size ensures collaborative, supportive environments while providing sufficient diversity of perspectives and teaching approaches (McFeat, 1974). Participation can serve as preparation for summative or formative peer review of teaching while also offering an opportunity to connect with colleagues, build collegial relationships, and expand professional networks. Our authentic community of practice has developed naturally, as opposed to a top-down mandate. Therefore, our growth story demonstrates a classic diffusion of innovation principles. The building of a community of practice hub, encouraged cultural change and enabled leadership opportunities.

For some who are transitioning into academia, (for example within health disciplines, typically have clinical or laboratory backgrounds), they may lack formal teacher training, making a process of reflection on teaching critical. Recognised as supporting high quality teaching practice, Teaching Squares has essential elements of observation, critical reflection and collegial practice exchange with an objective being continuous professional development and improved teaching quality.

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The scholarly foundation for Teaching Squares demonstrates rigor and methodical progression from theory to practice. It is an example of how SoTL can build systematically on existing knowledge whilst incorporating new insights. The theoretical foundation was based on incorporation of Hein (1991) social construction and Bourdieu (1989) social capital theories, which provided insight for practical considerations underlying the mechanisms of professional learning and community development. With incorporation of Haave (2014) and Cutroni and Paladino (2023) whose work provided conceptual anchoring by way of emphasis on how to incorporate structural flexibility within integration into a community of practice.

We conducted systematic engagement with the literature by undertaking a scoping review to explore the use of Teaching Squares by interdisciplinary higher education academics when engaging in a cycle of teaching reflection (Harmon et al., 2024). Following ethical approval [HREC 204696], the qualitative pilot study Brown et al. (2024) expands on our commitment to ethical evidence-based practice. From our papers for publication, conference presentations and reflection, we undertook a sophisticated process an adaptation of a participant handbook, participant guidelines (Harmon, Weiler, et al., 2025), and redevelopment of the TIU website and video (Harmon, Kaur, et al., 2025). We used our research findings in addition to feedback from both change champions and Teaching Squares participants to develop and refine these tools. With a specific focus on psychological safety and non-judgmental environments we addressed critical implementation factors which are often overlooked in formal peer review programmes.

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