

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Collaborative reflection in online education: Extending teaching squares to foster peer learning among online educators

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How can higher educational educators break free from the isolation of online teaching and build meaningful professional connections? This presentation explores how an Australian University has adapted 'Teaching Squares' as initiative to suit a digital environment, offering a flexible, scalable model for collaborative professional development among online educators. At its core, the initiative transforms solitary online teaching into a shared journey of observation, reflection, and growth.

The purpose of this initiative is to address a persistent challenge in online education including lack of structured opportunities for peer interaction and reflective dialogue. Many online educators work in silos, rarely witnessing how others design or deliver their courses. The use of teaching squares program reimagines professional learning by bringing educators together through structured, non-evaluative peer observation which is designed not for critique, but for inspiration and self-reflection.

Originally implemented in face-to-face university settings, Teaching Squares brings together three to four educators to observe each other's teaching over a fixed period. In a digital space, instead of in-person classroom visits, participants share a curated selection of course artefacts including recorded lectures, forum threads, LMS navigation, announcements, and assessment materials. These are reviewed asynchronously, enabling participants to engage with rich teaching content at their own pace. This is then followed by a structured reflection and a virtual group debrief.

This approach is underpinned by principles from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), social constructivism, and collaborative learning theory. It recognises that peer-led reflection can deepen teaching practice and build collegial bonds, particularly when done in a psychologically safe, non-judgemental space. Rather than being evaluated, each educator reflects on their own practice after observing others, focusing on elements they found inspiring or thought-provoking.

Participants report wide-ranging benefits including greater self-awareness, new pedagogical ideas, and a stronger sense of professional belonging. From improving student engagement strategies in discussion forums to rethinking assessment clarity, many have implemented changes directly influenced by what they observed. For some, the experience sparked longer-term collaborative partnerships and ongoing pedagogical conversations.

What makes this initiative particularly relevant to today's online education landscape is its accessibility and scalability. By removing geographical constraints and time pressures, the program invites broader participation including casual and early-career educators who are often left out of traditional professional development opportunities. The asynchronous format also allows for deeper, repeated exploration of teaching materials, leading to more thoughtful reflection.

Preliminary results from our ongoing evaluation show strong participant satisfaction and increased teaching confidence. These early findings suggest that Teaching Squares doesn't just support individual growth, it fosters a culture of shared learning across the institution.

This presentation will walk through the process of adapting and implementing Teaching Squares in an online education setup. It will showcase real artefacts, share participant views and reviews, and offer practical guidance for replicating the model in other online or blended environments. Ultimately, it invites educators to rethink professional development not as a solitary pursuit but as a shared, reflective, and transformative practice.

Keywords: peer learning, reflective practice, online teaching, collaboration, professional development, digital pedagogy.

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