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Teaching Squares Bring Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives



I REGULARLY HEAR colleagues complaining that they never have time to discuss teaching, and I know this is true in my liberal arts and sciences campus at this large research university. We devote so much of our time to teaching students, preparing classes, grading student work, and doing research that there's little time left to compare notes with our colleagues, even those next door. On those rare occasions when we do, it's often a pleasant surprise. Interesting teaching strategies are being implemented all around us. When this happens to me I often think, "I wish I could come see how you do that!"

What we don't seem to have are structures that facilitate these conversations and observations. Technology now makes possible international asynchronous conversations such as those on the Teaching Professor Blog. But we also need something that facilitates local, face-to-face conversations with others at our institution. At the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta, I think we have found a solution: teaching squares.

Teaching squares build the instructional abilities of teaching faculty. They were first developed by Anne Wesley at St. Louis Community College and have been used by many North American universities and colleges. We introduced them here at the Augustana Campus in 2009, and they've been running during most terms since.

A teaching square consists of four faculty from different disciplines who visit each other's classes within a two-to-three-week period. After the classroom visits, the four gather around coffee or a meal to discuss the teaching observed. The intention of the square is not to criticize each other's teaching. Rather, it's to gather ideas on different teaching approaches that might be used in one's own classes. It's an opportunity for faculty to reflect on their own teaching in light of colleagues' teaching examples. Could I do something like that? Would that approach work with the content I teach? I might be able to use that, but what would I need to change so that it better fits with my

teaching style? Are my students ready for a strategy like that? It's a constructive way to confront current teaching practices in light of some potential alternatives.

While I was associate dean of teaching from 2010 to 2013, the feedback I received from faculty who participated in the activity was positive. What they said was most helpful was simply having a structure that included time for discussion of teaching-related issues. Their exchanges usually started off with what they'd observed in each other's classes but often segued into analysis of the issues being faced by all of them in their courses.

I also think teaching squares are effective because they involve cross-disciplinary collaboration. The views and perspective of those who teach different kinds of content can be very helpful in providing new perspectives on the content being taught. In 2011, the University of Alberta's Festival of Teaching included a program where faculty could sign up and then visit different classes that had been opened for the festival. We had positive feedback about the opportunity to observe different teaching styles and strategies, but we also got constructive criticism that a valuable component was missing—the reflective conversation that typically follows in a formal teaching squares program. It's not always easy to schedule the four faculty needed for a square, but it's definitely worth the effort, given the value of these follow-up discussions.

Some participants have told us that they'd

like to get evaluative feedback on their teaching. In the spirit of a teaching square, however, this cannot be one of its goals. The discussion of teaching needs to be free of evaluation and judgment. When exchanges become critical and personal, they can produce defensiveness and suspicion, and that would inhibit the open exchange of ideas and the free sharing of teaching strategies.

We continue to use teaching squares as part of our faculty development program at Augustana. I recommend the structure. If you can round up four colleagues, you can do a square on your own, or it might be something you could recommend to your teaching center or faculty development program.

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Giving and Receiving Instructional Advice

HOW MUCH INSTRUCTIONAL advice have you heard over the years? How often when you talk about an instructional issue are you given advice, whether you ask for it or not? Let's say you're a new teacher or you're teaching a class you haven't taught before or something unexpected happens in your class; if you'd like some advice, all you need to do is ask. Anybody who's spent any time in the classroom seemingly has the right to offer advice. And if you'd rather read advice, there's still plenty offered in the pedagogical literature, to say nothing of blogs and other social media sources.

Some of the advice offered by colleagues and in articles is excellent. Most of us can recite the good and wise things we've learned from fellow teachers. But not all instructional advice is equally good, and it's not always easy to separate the good advice from advice that is decidedly ho-hum or just plain not very good. The problem is that really bad advice can be delivered articulately and with great conviction. So when a colleague offers advice or you read an article that tells you what you should do about some instructional issue, here are some criteria you can use to consider the merits of what's being offered.

First, the advice should always be preceded or followed by some sort of discussion of why you should be doing whatever is being suggested. In the pedagogical domain (as opposed to the parental one), it isn't good enough to say here's how you do it and you do it this way because I said so or because that's how I do it. There needs to be some sort of educational rationale behind what somebody is telling you to do. "Don't use

take-home exams." Why not? "Don't let students call you by your first name." Why not? "Don't give in to demands for extra credit." Why not? The assumptions on which the advice is based need to be revealed so they can be considered and assessed.

Second, the advice needs to be laid up against what you think you know and have experienced in class. That doesn't mean you have a corner on truth. You can believe some things about teaching and learning that simply aren't true, but advice that flies in the face of what you believe and what regularly happens in your class should be questioned. There is something to be said about trusting your gut; at the same time there's something to be said for not trusting it completely.

Third, how does the advice square with the evidence? For teachers who don't read much educational research or pedagogical literature, where the weight of the evidence falls isn't always known. Reading more, even a bit more, helps a lot with that issue. The fact of the matter is that virtually every aspect of teaching and learning has been studied, and most aspects have been studied at length. Classroom practice could easily be evidence based if teachers knew the evidence and were willing to act on it. But even without a thorough knowledge of what's known, you can (and should) ask those offering advice if there's research or evidence that stands behind what they're recommending. If they can't cite any, that doesn't mean there isn't any, but it does mean that the advice isn't being offered in light of it. Moreover, those not all that conversant with the evidence can certainly ask those who are or those who

might know where to look for the evidence. Advice and opinions ought to be regularly considered in light of the evidence.

Finally, if you've gotten some advice that kind of makes sense but you're still not totally convinced, run it past a colleague you trust. "Somebody told me I should ..." or "I read in this article that teachers should ... and I'd be really interested to know what you think about that." You may have a colleague whom you trust, one who is a dear friend and fellow researcher, but that doesn't mean that that colleague is pedagogically sophisticated. So run your instructional quandaries past those colleagues whose teaching you know to be good and whose insights about pedagogy you have found to be wise.

I think all of us ought to be a bit more careful about offering advice, particularly the definitive here's-exactly-how-you-do-that kind of instructional advice. If something works well for us, that doesn't guarantee it's going to work equally well when another teacher who teaches a different subject and larger classes tries to use it. Making suggestions, proposing alternatives, exploring options, and asking questions is a better way of helping someone who looks like he or she might want or need advice.

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