

**Report concerning “Mentoring through Teaching Squares in the Core Curriculum”
Millsaps College**

ACS Mellon Faculty Renewal Grant

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Report submitted by Laura Franey

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Amount of grant: \$1,380

Program Description and Analysis, including Goals and Anticipated Improvements

Our program—“Mentoring through Teaching Squares in the Core Curriculum”—was successful. In the fall, we had sixteen participants (two squares of four people each; one triangle of three people; and one pentagon of five people), and in the spring we had six participants (two triangles of three people each), for a total of twenty-two. The participants came from two of the three academic divisions—Arts & Letters and the Sciences—and eleven departments: Art, Biology, Computer Science, Education, English, History, Modern Languages, Political Science, Psychology, Religious Studies, and Sociology/Anthropology.

The majority of the participants in the fall were teaching Core 1, our interdisciplinary Freshman Seminar that focuses on critical thinking and writing. This provided a good basis for shared discussion of best practices in Core 1, especially in terms of successful active and collaborative learning techniques to use with first-year students. Other Core courses taught by our participants in 2010-2011 included Core 2: Topics in the Ancient World; Core 3: Topics in the Medieval World; Core 4: Topics in the Modern World; Core 5: Topics in the Contemporary World; Core 6 (various courses in the social sciences); and Cores 7 and 9 (various courses in the natural sciences and computer sciences).

Our schedule of events stayed very close to our predicted schedule. Within the first month of the fall semester, we had a Friday lunchtime meeting in which participants learned more about the program, asked questions, and met with the other members of their assigned group to exchange syllabi and set up classroom visits. Classroom visits and the Small Square Shares occurred over the following two months. (A Small Square Share consists of the members of each square/triangle/pentagon getting together for lunch or dinner to discuss what they learned from—and how they were inspired by— their classroom visits.) Then during finals week, all participants were invited to lunch in the private faculty dining room of the Millsaps cafeteria for the Big Square Share. During the Big Square Share, all present were asked to share observations, stories, and plans for how to incorporate practices they had observed in future incarnations of their core courses. Participants also filled out the exit survey at the Big Square Share. As we (Ashleigh and Laura) were both square participants in the fall, we not only facilitated the program and the big square share, but each of us also participated in the small square share for our own group, shared our observations and plans during the big square share, and filled out the exit survey.

The schedule in the spring semester was very similar. Our initial meeting happened a little later in the semester, but as we only had six participants, things still went smoothly. The members of the two triangles made their classroom visits over a four or five week period and had their small “triangle” shares. Then we (Ashleigh and Laura) joined the six participants for a Big Square Share during finals week. The big square share was a lunch of pizza and cookies in a classroom, since we felt that would actually be a more intimate space for a small group than the large faculty dining area in the cafeteria.

Our overall goal for this project was to enhance teaching effectiveness and create mentoring relationships in the Millsaps Core curriculum through faculty participation in Teaching Squares, a program of non-evaluative classroom observations and structured sharing sessions. We also hoped the program would provide inspiration in one particular aspect of classroom instruction that students at Millsaps have sometimes evaluated at lower rates than other aspects on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). That area is “active and collaborative learning.” Naturally, it is hard to measure, precisely, the long-term impact Teaching Squares in the Core will have on teaching effectiveness, and particularly the impact it will have in terms of active and collaborative learning, but most faculty participants did indicate in exit surveys that they gained insights related to the importance of student-centered learning and the need to respond closely to students’ varied learning styles, and that they are now eager to incorporate new activities that will be more student-oriented and/or student-directed.

We hoped to enhance relationships between faculty members from different disciplines and from different academic ranks on campus who all contribute to our strong interdisciplinary core curriculum. We wanted faculty to come together for inspiration, support, and the exchange of knowledge. The responses to the exit survey (see Appendix) indicate that faculty did create good working relationships and felt supported and inspired to continue making improvements in their classroom teaching. Faculty participants noted that a valuable outcome from the program was the fact that they enriched their relationships with other faculty members, were exposed to other teaching styles and approaches, and got the chance to see things from a student perspective when they visited classes. Our ultimate hope is that participants in the program will continue discussing pedagogy with colleagues they met (or got to know better) through Teaching Squares, continue to visit each other’s classrooms, and, perhaps, to create more formal mentoring relationships in the future. It is likely that many of the participants will choose to participate in a general Teaching Squares program (i.e. one NOT focused specifically on the Core curriculum) that will be administered in 2011-2012 by the Faculty Development Committee. We will have to wait to see if formal mentoring relationships are formed.

Since the twenty-two participants represented close to one-fifth of our total faculty and since the participants came from eleven different departments, it seems that Teaching Squares in the Core had a pretty wide-reaching effect on the campus. This impact was probably greatest in the social sciences and the humanities, as we had fewer participants from the natural sciences, math, and business.

We plan to invite faculty participants in August to send us written explanations of successful active and collaborative learning practices for uploading to the Course

Connect section dedicated to the Core. (We had hoped to do this during each semester, but as the Big Square Shares came so late, we have not yet been able to incorporate this valuable step.) Sharing these activities on Course Connect will ensure that what people learned from the program will be available to others who teach in the Core and will become part of our ongoing building of shared resources for those teaching in the Core curriculum.

We will also look for a regional (perhaps ACS-sponsored) pedagogy conference at which we could present a paper about how interested parties could introduce a Teaching Squares approach on their own campuses. The program is becoming more widely known after its introduction more than a decade ago, and we would like to continue to spread the word about this unique teacher development and mentoring program.

The appendix below includes the questions asked on the exit survey and sample responses to each question. When the participants gathered for the Big Square Share each semester, we distributed a short questionnaire and had participants fill it out before they left. Fifteen of the twenty-two participants attended the Big Square Shares and filled out the exit survey. Results generally show that we had accomplished the goals we set out. We would be happy to provide PDF copies of every exit survey if that is so desired.

There are some key ways that we could improve “Mentoring through Teaching Squares in the Core Curriculum” if we offered the program again. First, we could figure out ways to attract more faculty participants in the spring, when Core 1 is not being taught. What this means is that we would have to do better outreach to those teaching in the natural sciences and mathematics (Cores 7, 8, and 9). We also should make a greater effort to persuade faculty from the Else School of Management to participate. Since only four or five faculty from the Else School would normally even be eligible for Teaching Squares in the Core (because only a few people from the Else School teach courses in the Core curriculum each year), we could contact those eligible faculty individually (rather than only inviting them through the mass emails and general announcements at faculty meetings that we used this year). Secondly, we should probably do more checking in/oversight during the period of the classroom visits, and perhaps even have participants turn in their visit schedules to ensure all visits are being made in a timely manner. Late in the fall semester, we learned that a couple of participants were not completing all of their classroom visits, and this fact rightly disturbed the other members of those groups and had the potential to disrupt both the schedule and the effectiveness of the program. Luckily, these were isolated incidents, but we could do a better job next time of heading off such problems early.

Budget

We were granted \$1,380, which was intended to cover the maximum number of participants we might have each semester. We only spent \$319.01, partly because we had two fewer participants than our lowest estimated number of participants (22 rather than 24), and partly because of either one or both of the following factors: (1) a couple of groups must have decided not to get reimbursed for their “small square share” lunches/dinners, despite repeated email and verbal reminders from us (the administrators)

with clear instructions as to how to get reimbursed and (2) it is possible that some of the receipts were turned in but were charged to the wrong account. This happened originally to the reimbursement for the Big Square Share (\$73.03) in the fall (it was accidentally charged to the English Department) but this mistake was fixed. We also distributed materials electronically, so there were no photocopying costs.

ESTIMATED BUDGET (from original grant proposal):

Estimated costs per semester:

- Cost of photocopying informational materials: \$15
- Cost of the meals for the “square shares”: \$70 per square for a total cost of approximately \$210 - \$420 (based on an estimate of 3 – 6 squares, with 4 people per square)
- Cost of the “large square share” over lunch in the Faculty Dining Room of the Millsaps cafeteria: Between \$120 and \$190, based on an estimate of 15 – 25 faculty and administrator attendees plus the two directors of the grant

Total estimated budget for the year (2010-2011):

- Lowest estimated cost, based on 6 squares total during the year: **\$690.**
- Highest estimated cost, based on 12 squares total during the year: **\$1380**

ACTUAL BUDGET

Fall semester:

1) Small square share reimbursement (for the group of 5)	75.90
2) Small square share reimbursement (group of 4)	55.35
3) Big square share (lunch for 10 in the Millsaps Cafeteria)	73.03

Spring semester:

1) Small square share reimbursement (group of 3)	53.75
2) Big square share lunch (pizza, cookies, & drinks for 7)	60.98
Total expenses	319.01

Summary of program (for possible inclusion on the ACS Faculty Renewal website):

Twenty-two Millsaps faculty members participated in a program called “Mentoring through Teaching Squares in the Core Curriculum.” Utilizing a unique program pioneered by Anne Wessely, David Montgomery, Gail Heyne Hafer, and Kelly Ballard at St. Louis Community College, we gathered sixteen faculty members in the fall and six faculty members in the spring to participate in classroom visits, small square share lunches/dinners, and a big square share. The faculty were teaching various courses in the Millsaps interdisciplinary Core Curriculum, and a large number of those participating in the fall were teaching our Freshman Seminar, which focuses on critical thinking and writing. The goal of Teaching Squares is for faculty to use classroom visits to analyze and improve their *own* classroom practices—not to evaluate or critique their peers’

classroom practices. Therefore, during the sharing sessions, participating faculty discussed the activities, styles, and approaches witnessed in the classrooms of their peers that were most inspiring to them or that they now plan to emulate or incorporate in some way in future classes. Sharing sessions focused especially on ways that we can enhance our use of active and collaborative learning techniques so as to improve student learning.

Appendix

Here is a generous sampling from the handwritten responses on the Exit Survey.

Question 1: What insights have you gained about your own teaching styles, classroom techniques or activities, interactions with students, etc. as a result of participating in Teaching Squares?

- 1) Encouragement that what I do is in line with other disciplines, but also inspiration to try new things, including journaling styles and more diverse group work.
- 2) I learned about not only asking good primary questions, but following up with second and third questions that force students to do more detailed analysis of problems.
- 3) I learned that students are more responsive when the class atmosphere is relaxed. There can still be a clear differentiation between professor and student when the class structure allows room for changing direction based on students' needs.
- 4) I need to focus less on content and more on engagement with the students' learning process.
- 5) I got some great reinforcement of the need to incorporate more group work and opportunities for all students to speak.
- 6) I got some great ideas for increasing student engagement while reducing my workload and how to lead students through the writing process.
- 7) I've realized I can do more with various styles of delivery and engage students more in teaching concepts to themselves and others by getting everyone involved in the classroom.
- 8) The experience reminded me to vary the balance between me talking and students talking—keeps things from getting dull!
- 9) Warm-up exercises can help get students motivated to work/discuss.

Question 2:

Participants were asked if they had already included new classroom practices they had learned during Teaching Squares and if they planned to implement new practices the following semester. The majority (9 of 15) said, yes, they had already included new classroom practices learned in Teaching Squares. In addition, the vast majority (14 out of 15) said that they planned to implement new practices next semester. (Note: we should probably restructure the second question to read simply “in the future” rather than “next semester” because not everyone teaches Core courses every semester.)

Then they were asked the following question: “If you answered yes to one or both of these questions, please explain the new practices here.”

- 1) I am going to restructure my “journal.”
- 2) I plan to add reading quizzes and small group activities.
- 3) Definitely going to incorporate ideas about application of theoretical perspectives to topic areas.
- 4) Focused questions to give out to students for discussion.
- 5) Use of an engagement grade and a folder to gather small assignments and feedback given only periodically.
- 6) One thing I changed based on observing [another teacher] is not relying so much on oral instructions, especially for first years.
- 7) Each of my square colleagues did a fantastic job of easing their students into conceptual frameworks by building from one small idea to bigger ones. I will definitely do that more frequently.
- 8) a) I already use lots of images, but I’ve now begun to ask students to interpret these images on their own. b) Peer review of writing assignments.
- 9) I really appreciate the extent to which my colleagues engage with their texts. I can do a better job of that.
- 10) I plan to incorporate pauses in lectures where I can assess the students’ understanding. I also will make better use of technology in the classroom.
- 11) I’m planning to incorporate more student oral presentations next semester.

Question 3: What have you found most valuable about participating in Teaching Squares?

- 1) Feeling like a student again is nice—seeing things from their level reminds me that I should be clearer and more inviting of everyone to participate.
- 2) Seeing how impressive our faculty are—there is so much we offer and we forget how good the faculty here are.
- 3) I always enjoy seeing (and borrowing) others’ ideas. I am also gratified to hear how others value my teaching—sometimes things I felt went awry are viewed differently through other eyes.
- 4) Improved and enriched relationships with faculty (hopefully leading to more fruitful collaboration).
- 5) Simply getting to know colleagues better.
- 6) Watching my colleagues successfully handle challenges with student preparation and engagement.
- 7) Sharing ideas. It sparks my thinking, also reminds me that my challenges are shared.
- 8) Support and the opportunity to observe people in other disciplines.
- 9) The formal opportunity to talk about teaching in an informal, particular, and meaningful way.
- 10) I liked the opportunity to interact with other disciplines.
- 11) Experiencing another professor’s classroom helps me understand what is unique about my approach and what is shared.

Question 4: What have you found least valuable about participating and/or what could be improved?

Five of the fifteen respondents answered “not applicable,” left the question blank, or said they couldn’t think of something to say in response.

Other sample responses follow:

- 1) I wouldn’t mind a writeup or evaluation element to it, though maybe that goes counter to the Teaching Squares concept.
- 2) I think more constructive feedback—by choice.
- 3) It might be nice to do a group with people teaching similar things.
- 4) Needed more time—seemed almost impossible to work out scheduling stuff, which is silly since we had the whole semester. I don’t think it was the fault of anything but life.
- 5) My only problem was finding time for all of us to visit classes and meet informally.
- 6) More commitment to visit the classes by each member in the small squares.