

# Teaching Triangles: A Campus Wide Interdisciplinary Program for Faculty Professional Development

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## Abstract

Providing meaningful professional development at a small teaching university can be a challenge. Since there are limited opportunities to bring in big named speakers for a lecture or to send faculty to conferences, faculty and administration need to find low cost and creative ways to support professional development. This paper will discuss how a university has transformed faculty development through a peer-based model called "Teaching Triangles". Initially adopted as a method to support new faculty in one department, it has grown into an interdisciplinary campus wide initiative. Along with faculty participation, students have also become actively involved in the process.

## Introduction

The institution is a small liberal arts teaching university with approximately 65 full time faculty members combined at the main and graduate program campuses. Faculty are encouraged to seek out innovative learning methods but tight budgets limit the amount of professional development provided. Therefore, faculty often resort to seeking out low cost or free alternatives to attending conferences, workshops or lectures on how to become better teachers.

In 2008, a biology professor attended the National Association of Biology Teachers (NABT) conference where she learned about Teaching Squares (T. Elrod, B. Sarchet and J. Bodenweiser, personal communication, October, 2008). This conference presentation was based on the work of Anne Wessely from St. Louis Community College (as cited in Grooters, 2008, p. 2). This individual took on the role of Department Chair of Natural Sciences and Math in Fall 2011, and she thus modified the Teaching Squares model to Teaching Triangles. She formed two triangles with the six faculty members that semester. That semester, her department members observed one another and discussed strategies they learned.

That same semester, the chair of NS and Math opened up the opportunity to the rest of the campus through a brown bag lunch presentation. In the spring of 2012, 6 other faculty participated. The next semester word got out and participation increased. For the following several semesters, faculty were sent an email to garner interest in participating stating the benefits of participating in the experience as well as logistical information

about how it worked and the time commitment. (see Appendix A for email example)

Once faculty responded, they were randomly matched into triangles ensuring the matches were from different departments so there was an interdisciplinary element. Care was taken not to match a participant's direct supervisor in the same triangle since it was not intended to be evaluative of one's teaching. Each Triangle was responsible for coordinating schedules so each member of the triangle could observe one another's class once during the semester and a time was scheduled for the triangle to debrief about their experiences. At the end of the semester, participating faculty met for a lunch sponsored by the VP of Academic Affairs so faculty could debrief and share their experiences.

### Teaching Triangles Becomes an Interdisciplinary Campus Wide Initiative

Overall, participation has had positive growth among faculty across campus (See Table 1). Students began noticing that faculty from other departments were visiting their classes and even participating in their learning activities. Faculty were encouraged to share with their students what they were learning in their Teaching Triangles. In addition to watching fellow faculty teach, participants were also able to see how their students interacted with other students and professors in these classes (Gooblar, 2015).

In the 2014-15 academic year, it was determined that with increased participation there should be a more concerted effort to match participants for specific needs. A survey (see Appendix B) was sent to assist with matching Triangle participants. This format provided the opportunity to make specific requests and the participants reported they liked having these choices. The electronic participating survey also allowed for those who teach at our graduate campus and online the opportunity to be added to the mix since these groups who don't normally have the chance to visit campus and can be left out of these type of activities. Observations expanded to include online classes, practicum and clinical sites as well as evening courses for adults seeking their graduate degrees.

In the fall of 2015, the Education Department Chair volunteered to take over coordinating the Teaching Triangles. She had been participating in Teaching Triangles since 2012 and reported that this was the best professional development activity she had participated in on an ongoing basis. From previous work as a peer coach at the elementary and middle school levels, she knew the value of job embedded professional development for educators, especially the self-reflection aspects, and saw this replicated through Teaching Triangles at the university level (Huston & Weaver, 2008).

To further enhance the Teaching Triangles experience most recently, participating faculty were asked to meet early in the semester and set a specific goal of what they

would like to work on instructionally and share that with their Triangle. At the end of the semester, faculty were asked to report on their goal and what they had achieved through their efforts.

One key factor to the success of this program is positive support from administration. Early on, the Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs enthusiastically supported the efforts by encouraging new faculty to participate in Teaching Triangles and congratulates the participants when the Triangles are announced each semester. He has also hosts the debrief luncheons each spring where he attends and listens to the insights provided from participants. When asked for his opinion regarding the impact Teaching Triangles has had on faculty, he shared “we pride ourselves on being first and foremost a teaching institution. Faculty are committed to that proposition, and it is a pleasure for me to encourage faculty participation in, and to support, Teaching Triangles. Teaching Triangles provide a ready-made opportunity to share ideas with others. They also help foster a community of faculty committed to their craft as educators.”

#### Participants insights and feedback

When participants were asked to reflect on their experiences in Teaching Triangles, some of the responses included:

“Teaching Triangles has encouraged me to be more creative in my instruction, and has given me the confidence to step outside my comfort zone in offering unique and experiential lesson plans in my ongoing path to improve student engagement.” Assistant Professor of History

"Being able to observe and participate in a colleague's class showed me the way that historical simulations could be used in class ... As a result of this simulation and other conversations with my triangle, I have decided to pursue this further in my own work, both in philosophy courses and honors seminars." Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Honors Director

“I have participated in Teaching Triangles since its inception campus wide in 2012. I find the program to be stimulating and energizing as I observe and learn from the various teaching styles and practices of my colleagues. Too, I view Teaching Triangles as creative, and as an excellent vehicle for faculty morale and community building. I enjoy getting out of my office and area and visiting with and getting to know colleagues I do not see on a regular basis.” Associate Professor of English and Faculty Chair.

“I have completed three semesters of participation in Teaching Triangles. While I gained new perspectives on teaching, I think the most valuable benefit I’ve found is an affirmation of the challenges we all face as instructors in the classroom. As a new

professor, I felt inadequate at times, wondering why students weren't more engaged. It was refreshing to see professors with much more experience deal with the same challenges. It was even better to be able to discuss the challenges with these professors and brainstorm solutions." Assistant Professor of Accounting.

"I was happy to have the opportunity to get to know new faculty members and also found it beneficial to get deeper insights into the courses we offer in each of their disciplines through discussions and sharing of syllabi amongst our Triangle as well as through sitting in on their classes" Assistant Professor of Art and Art Program Director

### Taking Professional Development to the Next Level

During the summer of 2016, the new Academic Dean assumed the responsibility of forming a committee to develop a center for active teaching and learning. Many of the committee, made up of volunteers from different departments across campus, are also participants of Teaching Triangles. It was determined that Teaching Triangles could fall under the umbrella of the new center for teaching and learning. Through this center, participants in Teaching Triangles as well as all faculty members (adjunct and full time) are able to benefit from this concerted professional development initiative.

### Summary

What started as a small technique used to mentor new faculty in one department has grown to an interdisciplinary campus wide initiative in which faculty are able to discuss teaching methods regularly in department meetings and even at a recent Faculty Senate meeting (Gooblar, 2015).

When asked to reflect on the success of the Teaching Triangles program, the chair of the Natural Sciences and Math department stated "as we conclude our eleventh semester of Teaching Triangles, I find enormous gratification that our program has grown from six participants to regularly having 25-30 participants per semester. My colleagues often comment on how it is refreshing to get out of their silos and get to know other faculty. We love seeing 'our' students in other areas on campus. And our students love having visitors in their classroom. I think it is vitally important to show our students that we are constantly striving to improve our own craft."

As faculty continue to strive for excellence in teaching and learning at a small liberal arts university, other institutions can learn from these experiences. Any institution, regardless of their size can replicate this program with eager faculty, supportive administration and a culture of collaborative spirit.

## References

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Table 1  
 Participation in Teaching Triangles Each Semester 2011-2016

Semester	Number of participants
Fall 2011	6
Spring 2012	6
Fall 2012	13
Spring 2013	20 * Two adjuncts participated this semester
Fall 2013	27
Spring 2014	22
Fall 2014	21
Spring 2015	24
Fall 2015	25
Spring 2016	23
Fall 2016	30 * Three adjuncts volunteered to participate in a triangle this semester

## Appendix A (sample email)

Dear Colleagues,

As the self-appointed Teaching Triangles coordinator, this is your first call for participation in USM's own in house professional development exercise in this semester.

What is Teaching Triangles? In groups of three, usually interdisciplinary, faculty observe each other teach and use the exercise to self-reflect on their own teaching - what did you see that would help you? What's the time commitment? Approximately 4 hours. Two observations of your other triads followed by a get together in your threesome to chat about things. Okay - but you said 4 hours? – Ah, yes, another hour or so would be an entire group get together at the end of the academic year with lunch provided by the Provost.

Over the past semesters of us doing this, we've experienced various outcomes of the exercise... Getting to know other faculty. Having the students see us value teaching and work to improve it. Getting ideas about instigating discussions, facilitating group work, using technology etc. Getting to check 'professional development' on your ending year evaluation! Getting to find your way around campus!!

## Appendix B (sample survey)

### Teaching Triangle Participating Survey

Following our discussion during our Teaching Triangles lunch in May, I invite you to fill out this form with the intent of providing more focused triangles, if so desired. NOTE that 'wants' may not 'get'!

1. Please select how you wish to be placed:

Same triangle all year long \_\_\_\_\_

One triangle for the fall only \_\_\_\_\_

One triangle for the spring only \_\_\_\_\_

One triangle for the fall AND a different one for the spring \_\_\_\_\_

One triangle for the Fall and will let you know about the spring later \_\_\_\_\_

2. Please select a discipline you wish to be partnered with, or wish NOT to be partnered with. If choosing multiple disciplines, please rank with a 1, 2, 3 etc with 1 being most desired.

If you do choose "randomize me", you are an easy customer!! (Thank you!!)

Randomize me – I don't care and I love meeting new people!		
	Please place me with:	Please do not place me with:
Biology, Chemistry, Physics		
Mathematics		
Psychology, Criminology		
Music, Theatre, Art		
Nursing		
DPT		

Business		
English, TH, PH		
History, PS, GS		
Education		

3. I can offer: (please check all that apply AND/OR add in something yourself)

Facilitating classroom discussion	
Flipping a classroom (students complete work prior to coming to class and class time is thus more focused)	
Use of the Audience Response System, clickers	
Facilitating group work	
Use of technology in the classroom	
Online teaching	
Use of the modern classroom	
Supervising students on an internship / in the clinic / in the K-12 classroom	

4. I am particularly interested in seeing how my colleagues: (please check

5. all that apply AND/OR add in something yourself)

Facilitate classroom discussion	
Flip a classroom (students complete work prior to coming to class and class time is thus more focused)	
Use the Audience Response System, clickers	
Facilitate group work	
Use technology in the classroom	
Teach online	
Use the modern classroom	
Supervise students on an internship / in the clinic / in the K-12 classroom	