



VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF  
**WELLINGTON**  
TE HERENGA WAKA

# Teaching and Learning Circles

---

**Ako**  
AOTEAROA

## What's a Teaching and Learning Circle (TLC)?

A TLC comprises three or four colleagues who will visit each other's classes over the course of a semester and then meet to discuss what they have learnt from observing their colleagues' teaching. This resource pack provides information about the purpose and process of TLCs, and includes some handy forms to guide you through the process.

## Why join?

One of the most effective ways of refreshing our teaching is to see other teachers in action, and it's good to do this as part of a team. You may have had people observe your teaching before for evaluative or promotional purposes, but TLCs are different. The focus is on self-reflection and collegiality, not judging others.

## Acknowledgements

This resource was originally developed by a team from the Division of Humanities and from the Higher Education Development Centre at the University of Otago. It has been adapted by Victoria University of Wellington Centre for Academic Development, for Ako Aotearoa.



An Ako Aotearoa publication. This project output has been funded by Ako Aotearoa through the Regional Project Fund.

# Teaching and Learning Circles

## Purpose

The TLC initiative provides an opportunity to improve your teaching through reciprocal teaching observations, collegial dialogue and self-reflection.

The aim is to foster a culture of collegiality around teaching approaches, encourage reflective teaching practice and provide a supportive environment regarding teaching development. As a member of a TLC, you will have the opportunity to observe your colleagues' teaching for the purpose of reflecting on your own teaching practice. By observing others teach, you will be exposed to different teaching approaches, which may encourage you to question your own knowledge and refresh your teaching approach.

## Benefits

Previous TLC participants have reported the following benefits:

- improved confidence in teaching
- learning about new technologies by seeing them in action
- greater appreciation of students' learning experiences
- recognition of the possibilities for collaboration
- valued time for professional development and self-reflection
- positive social experience with colleagues
- collegial affirmation of effective teaching approaches

The information generated from your participation in a TLC can be used alongside student feedback to guide effective teaching practices and student learning. You could also use parts of your written reflections in your case for promotion.

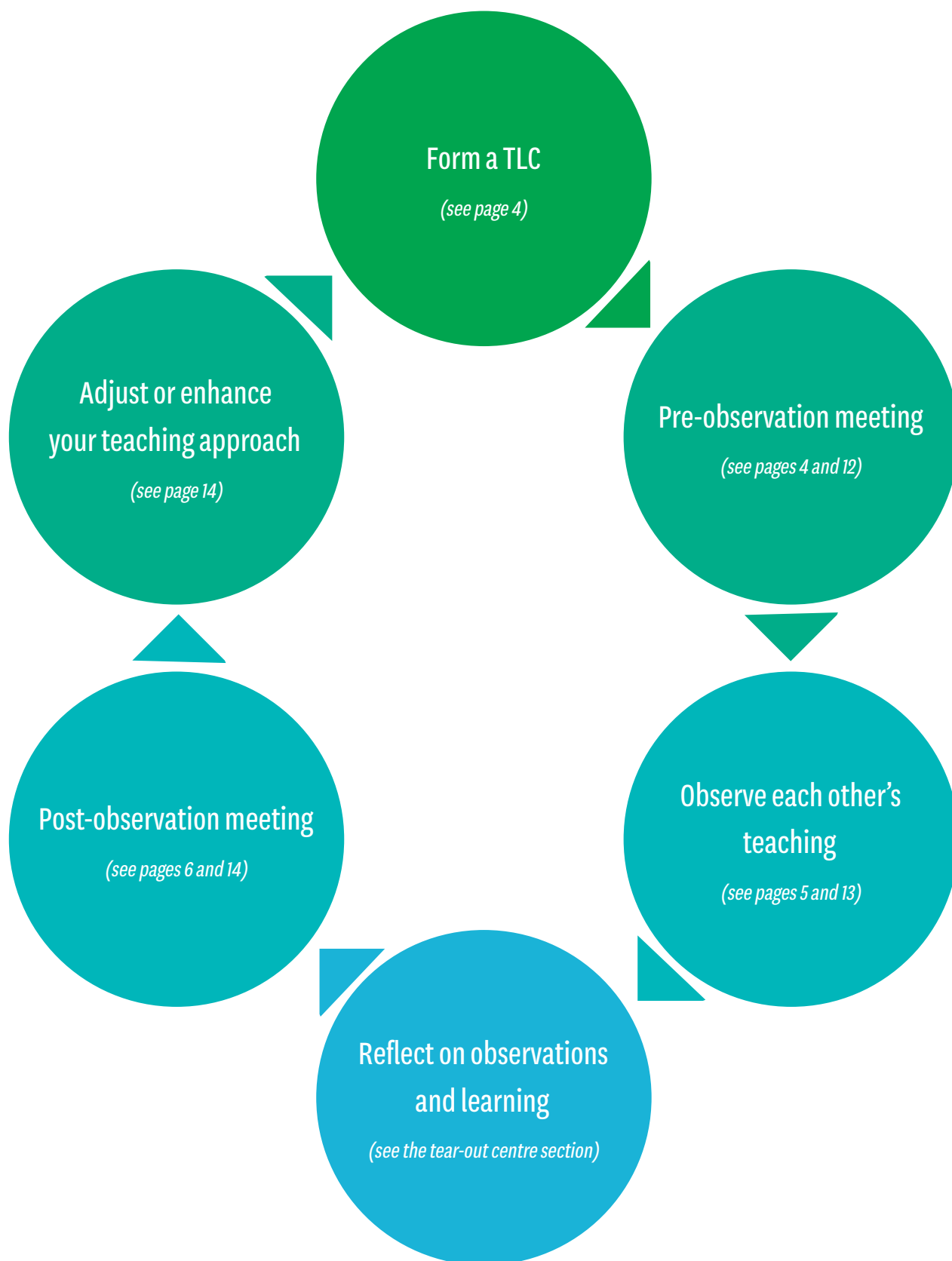
## Contact

To ask questions, please email [kathryn.sutherland@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:kathryn.sutherland@vuw.ac.nz) with the subject line: Teaching and Learning Circles.



This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0). Under this licence you are free to copy, distribute, display and perform the work as well as to remix, tweak, and build upon this work noncommercially, as long as you credit the author/s and license your new creations under the identical term.

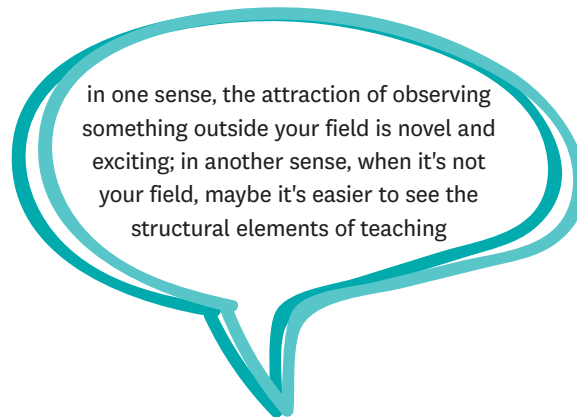
# The Teaching and Learning Circle process



# Getting started

## Form a TLC

Form a TLC of four people with teachers from within your subject-area or beyond. You could form an inter-disciplinary TLC to see how others teach in a variety of subject areas, or create a TLC with colleagues from within your own work unit. Circles have run within and across programmes, departments, divisions and faculties – there's no one way to do it and you'll always learn something – even from unexpected places! As you read through this document, you'll find suggestions and reflections from previous TLC participants in thought bubbles; the first one is below.



## The pre-observation meeting

Using the prompts on page 12, think about your own teaching practice and what you might want to get out of the TLC process, before you get together with your TLC colleagues. Then, make a time to meet with each other to talk through the prompt questions and decide on which classes you'll observe. Bring your calendars to your first meeting and be prepared to negotiate some times to observe each other; use the form on page 13 to do this. It's important to lock in these times before everyone's diaries fill up with other commitments!

## Decide what classes to invite colleagues to

Resist the desire to pick a 'good' class for observation. There's no need to change the way you usually teach, because people are visiting – they're there to reflect on their own practice not to judge or evaluate you. You never know what people may take away from an observation – a class that seems uninteresting or commonplace to you may be eye-opening for others.

## Decide on a focus for observation and reflection

You might like to start your observations with a broad-ranging approach (which we recommend if you're participating in a circle for the first time). However, you may wish to think about discussing potential target areas for your circle to focus on. The Guidelines and Reflection Prompts on page 12 will help with this. Use the boxes on the form to jot down a few ideas in advance.



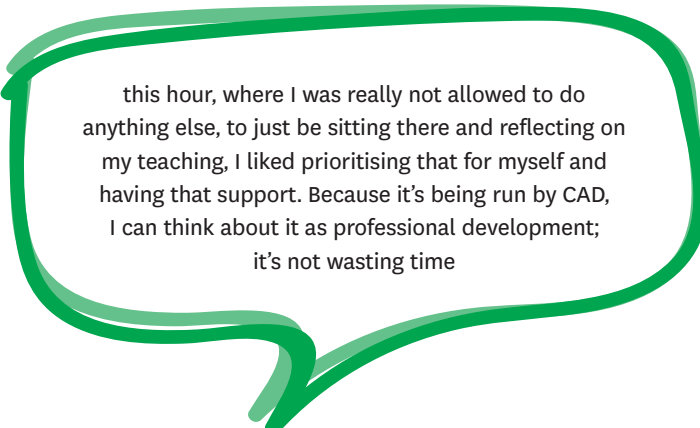
# Observing each other's teaching

Observing others in a non-evaluative way can be difficult. We're used to critiquing others and giving feedback. But that's not the aim with a TLC.

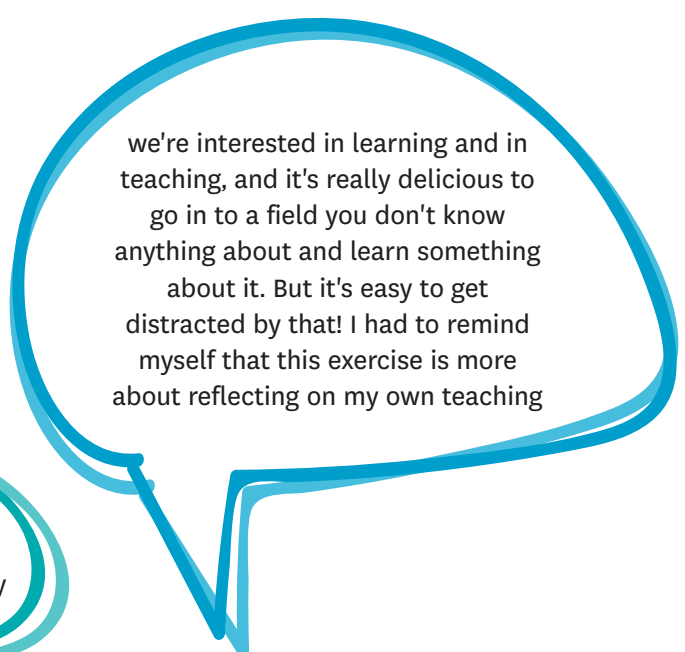
Use the fold-out guide in the centre of this booklet as a resource to take notes during your observation. The prompts are designed to guide you in thinking about your OWN teaching. Don't feel that you have to record something under every heading, and do feel free to note down other things you notice that aren't included on the form. There's a separate column to record your reflections. It can be helpful to come back to this after the observation, and you may also wish to jot down notes if they occur to you as you go. Some questions you could ask yourself:

- What do your colleagues do that surprise you?
- How are the things you observe similar or different to the way you teach?
- Are there things you could adapt to your own context? How might this work?

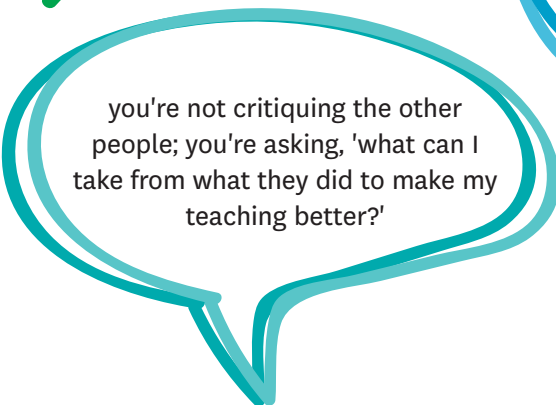
This TLC time is precious and important. Relish it!



this hour, where I was really not allowed to do anything else, to just be sitting there and reflecting on my teaching, I liked prioritising that for myself and having that support. Because it's being run by CAD, I can think about it as professional development; it's not wasting time



we're interested in learning and in teaching, and it's really delicious to go in to a field you don't know anything about and learn something about it. But it's easy to get distracted by that! I had to remind myself that this exercise is more about reflecting on my own teaching



you're not critiquing the other people; you're asking, 'what can I take from what they did to make my teaching better?'

# Sharing your reflections

After you've all observed each other teach, you'll meet to reflect together on the process.

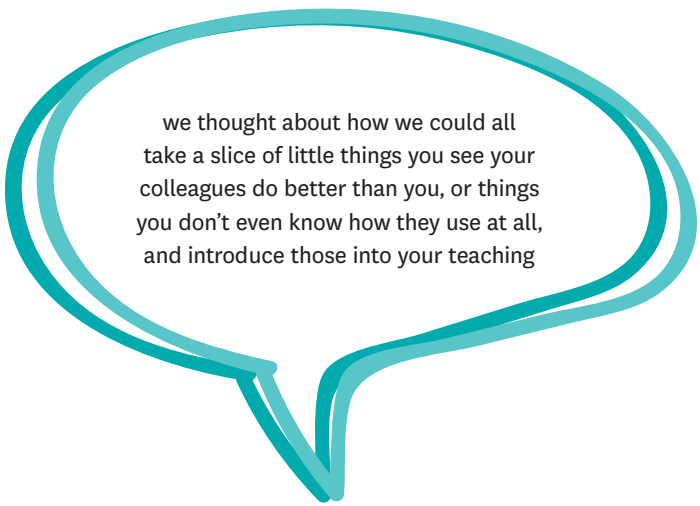
## Post-observation discussion

- Book a time to go to lunch
- Use prompts from the form on page 14 to start thinking about your reflections
- Start with who was observed first. You might like to use the prompts to guide your discussion.
- Share your reflections from watching the others teach
- Repeat for all group members
- Discuss together what you've learnt and changes you may make

As a group, discuss the big lessons you've learned about your OWN teaching from watching the others in action. What, if anything, have you decided to change about your own teaching practice as a result of engaging in this peer observation process?

Participants in the TLC initiative have made changes to their teaching practice such as:

- adopting new technologies
- using different strategies to engage students in discussion
- gaining confidence to tell stories and go 'off-script' in lectures
- sharing resources with colleagues



we thought about how we could all take a slice of little things you see your colleagues do better than you, or things you don't even know how they use at all, and introduce those into your teaching

Tear-out and copy this form to  
take with you to each of your  
observations

# Observation Notes

## Observations

*What do you notice?*

---

**Introduction** *What happens at the start of the class? What are students doing before the class begins? How many are there? When does the teacher arrive? How do they start?*

---

**Voice** *Can you hear the teacher? Where and how are they pitching their voice? What do you notice about tone/framing?*

---

**Technology** *What technology do they use and how? At what points? How does the technology use relate to learning activities?*

---

**Visibility and movement** *Where do they stand? Do they move around? Where, when, and how do they look at students? Do students ever move?*

---

**Explanations and examples** *Where do explanations occur? How often? How are things explained? What examples are brought in? By whom? When?*

---

**Questions** *Does the teacher ask questions? What kind? How many? How long do they wait for a response? Do they get one?*

*Do students ask questions? How is this managed?*

---

**Student engagement** *What are students doing – taking notes, listening, on laptops, talking? Where are they sitting? How is the teacher attentive/responsive to students' attention? How often (if at all) do students interact with each other? In what ways?*

---

**Timing** *Does the class feel lengthy or rushed? How does the teacher pace the material? What opportunities (if any) do students have to pause, reflect, or clarify?*

---

**Overall organisation** *How is the session structured? Are you (and the students) following along? Does the teacher signpost the organisation? How?*

---

**Conclusion/wind down** *How does the class end? Is there a wrap up and/or talk of what will happen next time? Does the end feel satisfying?*

---



## Reflections

*What is similar to and/or different from your own teaching?*

*How might you adapt any of what you observe?*

*What values (yours, theirs and/or the institution's) are being enacted by these practices?*

Tear-out and copy this form to  
take with you to each of your  
observations

# Example: Teaching and Learning Circle Observations

The example below includes a description in note form of who is talking when, and what happens at what times. You don't have to follow this example; it's just one approach. Please use whatever observation and reflection process is most helpful for YOU.

Time	DESCRIPTION (who is talking, what are they doing, how are others responding, etc)	NOTES/ REFLECTIONS
9:56am	KB greeting people. Music playing. Slide 1: A question. Students chatty. 3 talk on way past (1M, 2W).  Most laptops open.	Everyone seems happy and quite energised. Is it the music? I could try music in my lectures somewhere.
10:00am	Music down. Asks students to call out answers to question on the slide. 5-6 raise hands. KB points to W at back of room.	How does she get so many people keen to participate so willingly? Why don't my students respond so much/ quickly?
10:01am	KB affirms answer, praises student for tying it to readings. Expands on how it connects in to today's topic. Slide 2: agenda.  Laptops have slides open (are they from the Blackboard course?) students annotating. 1M in back row flicking between slides and Facebook.	Tying in the pre-work they've done, showing how it fits with today's lecture. I like this.  Wonder how long before others switch to social media?
10:04am	Slide 3: another question. Discuss with neighbour, 30secs, timer, bell dings. Heaps of people raise hands. KB chooses M in 2nd row. No-one on social media at the moment.	Seems to be fairly even participation from men and women so far. KB hasn't done much talking yet. I definitely talk much more in my lectures. Which is better/worse? Why? Need to ponder this.

# Guidelines and Reflective Prompts for the Pre-Observation Meeting

The following questions serve as prompts for the observation process. Complete your responses and discuss at your pre-observation meeting. Feel free to tear out this form to take to your meeting.

**1** What are your personal values regarding teaching and learning?

**2** What do you aim for students to learn? How do you enable them to learn this?

**3** How do you evaluate your teaching and your students' learning currently? (i.e. how's it going?)

**4** What are you doing well and what might you improve or enhance in your teaching to enable student learning?

**5** What are you feeling confident about and what are you feeling less confident about in your teaching approach?

**6** Are you trying anything new this semester?

**7** What are your goals for the day your TLC colleagues are in your classroom?

**8** What are you apprehensive about, if anything, regarding being observed by colleagues?

**9** What are you hoping to gain from participating in a TLC?

# Timetabling your observations

## Member details

### MEMBER 1

Contact details

## Class observation details

Course

Date

Location

Time

Additional comments

### MEMBER 2

Contact details

Course

Date

Location

Time

Additional comments

### MEMBER 3

Contact details

Course

Date

Location

Time

Additional comments

## My class observation details

Course

Date

Location

Time

Additional comments

# Reflections for the final meeting

You may find the following questions useful in guiding your own reflection or post-observation discussion with your colleagues. Remember that the purpose of this observation process has been to encourage your own self-reflection. Focus your discussions on what you learned about your own teaching, and avoid getting too judgemental or zeroing in on providing too much evaluation. The post-observation meeting should be seen as a collaborative dialogue between peers.

- 1** What have you learnt about your teaching philosophy and the personal values you bring to your teaching from your classroom observations?

- 2** How has the experience of again being in the 'learner' role prompted you to reflect on your own teaching?

- 3** What have you learnt is one of your teaching strengths?

- 4** What aspect of your teaching do you wish to improve? How are you going to do this?

- 5** What surprised you during this experience? What assumptions about teaching were challenged by what you observed?

- 6** What is one thing you learnt that will make your teaching more effective?

- 7** What is one thing you learnt that you are going to apply next trimester in your classroom?

# Take-aways

Here are some of the things previous participants at Victoria University of Wellington have taken away from their TLC experiences.

it was really lovely to get a sense of the potential for collaboration

People are so ridiculously busy that you don't often get a chance to sit and talk. We do enjoy each other's company, but we don't get much of it!

Talking and sharing, that was the best part for me. Getting closer and knowing my colleagues better, and we were all open to talk about the things that we care about with teaching. It was non-judgemental and quite supportive

when new technology comes online, I somehow never manage to get to any of the training sessions. So picking them up through watching a colleague in action is a kind of alternative way

I think the more we can elevate the importance of not only our teaching, but our teaching development, the better. And I think having variety is important because not everyone's the same and they're not going to respond to or value the same things

It really broadened my view of what you can do in a classroom, and why you might do it or not do it

# Useful websites and resources

We are thankful to all the other places around the world who have paved the way with reflective peer observation of teaching, and this guide draws (gratefully) on many of the resources listed below. We encourage you to see how others engage with peer observation elsewhere by reading through these really useful sites and resources. A simple search for 'Teaching Squares' or 'Teaching and Learning Circles' will also bring up many helpful sites.

Teaching Squares at the University Calgary:

<https://taylorinstitute.ucalgary.ca/resources/teaching-squares-observe-and-reflect-teaching-and-learning>

Teaching and Learning Circles at the University of Otago:

<https://ako.ac.nz/assets/Knowledge-centre/Teaching-and-learning-circles-A-framework-for-enhancing-teaching-culture-and-practice/d436c8e8e5/Teaching-and-Learning-Circles-report.pdf>

Teaching Squares at the University of Alberta:

<https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/faculty-development/teaching-squares-cross-disciplinary-perspectives/>

Teaching Squares at Northern Virginia Community College:

[https://www.nvcc.edu/cetl/\\_files/CETL-Teaching-Squares-Program-Manual-Spring-2015.pdf](https://www.nvcc.edu/cetl/_files/CETL-Teaching-Squares-Program-Manual-Spring-2015.pdf)

Teaching Squares at the University of South Australia:

<https://i.unisa.edu.au/staff/teaching-innovation-unit/teaching-support/peer-review-of-teaching/teaching-squares/>

Formative Peer Review of Teaching at the University of British Columbia:

<https://ctl.ubc.ca/programs/all-our-programs/peer-review-of-teaching-2/>