

The Square: facilitating conversations about complex subjects with objects

The Square is a creative, moderated dialogue methodology in which participants jointly investigate and visualize a situation or topic using objects. Guided by a moderator, participants (re)place these objects while reflecting on what they see and experience. They do not work towards a solution, but towards a common understanding of the complexity of the situation and an exploration of different perspectives on it.

The Square works well to facilitate conversations on complex or sensitive topics and to practice dialogue skills such as active listening, becoming aware of your own and other people's perspectives, and dealing with discomfort.

Background information

The Square has been developed together with artist platform Building Conversation as part of the Comenius education innovation project 'Fostering an Open Mind and Open Attitude in Higher Education', which aims to stimulate the exchange of perspectives and dialogue in education with creative working methods.

The following learning activities were developed in this project:

- [Open Minds](#): a digital game that stimulates perspective taking
- Playing Perspectives: a game design toolkit to explore different perspectives
- The Square: a creative dialogue methodology to practice dialogue skills and facilitate conversations on sensitive or complex issues.

On Campus

Supplies needed

- Moderator (external or the teacher, after having followed the required moderator training)
- The Square toolkit (incl floor mats and objects)

To book the toolkit for the city campus, contact Sigrid Merx s.merx@uu.nl

Science Park, contact Robin Bos R.C.Bos-8@umcutrecht.nl

Attention:

- *The toolkit needs to be pre-booked through Sigrid Merx*
- *For facilitation of the conversation it is strongly advised to use an experienced moderator. You can join the moderator training yourself or ask a trained moderator, if available. Contact Sigrid Merx to discuss training and moderator options.*

Currently, the teacher manual is only available in Dutch. The training can be provided in English on request.

Set-up classroom

A classroom, eventspace or outdoor area with at least 9m² floor surface available. If needed, move chairs and tables aside to create sufficient room. The emptier, (visually) calmer and quieter the room is, the better this methodology works.

Lay out The Square floor mats and the objects into the starting arrangement.

Step 1 (Preparation)

Book a suitable room (allow for sufficient preparation time) and the toolkit. Arrange a moderator or follow the training to facilitate the conversation yourself.

Step 2 (Preparation)

Together with the moderator or students, determine the topic of the conversation. Choose a topic/situation that is complex and relevant to the context in which the conversation is taking place (for example, a specific course). Topics at the intersection of science and society are often suitable, for example climate change, inclusion, AI and ethics, vaccination, animal testing, polarization, decolonization, adoption, self-determination, the wolf in the Netherlands. See the [teacher's manual](#) for examples

Step 3 (Preparation)

Make the chosen topic (in consultation with the moderator) into a case. Who and what, which (f)actors and emotions play a role in this complex issue? And how do they interact? Make sure that the case clearly brings up the tension present, and invites to research and explore the situation. See the [teacher's manual](#) for examples.

Step 4 (Preparation)

Set up the room: make sure there is sufficient room for the materials and participants.
Lay out the Square floormats and objects.

Step 5 (During class)

Introduce the moderator and the goal of the session in the wider context of the course.
Present the case, or let the moderator present the case. The moderator will then ask the participants to stand around the Square and introduces the conversation format. At the start of conversation the moderator will first ask each participant: will you join?

Step 6 (During class)

The moderator facilitates a 30-45 minute conversation, using the Square and the objects. By placing objects onto the Square and express their thoughts about this, participants jointly investigate and explore who, what, which (f)actors and emotions have a role in the situation. But more importantly, how these are related and interact. There is room for silence and to ponder and put into words any tensions or emotions that may arise.

Step 7 (During class)

After a short break the conversation will be followed up by a short reflective conversation, in which participants reflect on both the methodology – how did you experience having a conversation using this method? – and the case itself – did the conversation change your view or deepen your insight into the issue?

Step 8 (Evaluation)

Participating in The Square offers valuable opportunities to further integrate the insights and experiences gained into the students' learning process. In a follow-up activity, for example, they could further elaborate on their reflection, delve deeper into the case or think of other conversation methods. See the [teacher's manual](#) for suggestions.