

Categorizing 'Academic First-Year Seminar on Various Topics across Sections',
a new Typology and Teacher Support Tool developed at the ULiège

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Summary:

First-Year Seminars (FYS) are renowned for the role they play in the transition from secondary school to university, with the aim of supporting students' academic and social development (Hunter & Linder, 2005). Already in 2013, Greenfield, Keup and Gardner (2013) reported that 85-95% of institutions offered a FYS to their first-year students.

In general terms, a FYS "is a small discussion-based course in which students and their instructors exchange ideas and information [...] and aims to assist first-year students in their academic and social development and in their transition to college" (Gianoutsos, 2015; Hunter & Linder, 2005). Several authors (Gianoutsos, 2015; Keup & Petschauer, 2011; Hunter & Linder 2005; Barefoot, 1992) have theoretically developed a typology that distinguishes five categories of FYS: (a) the extended orientation seminar, (b) the academic seminar with uniform content across all sections, (c) the academic seminar on various topics across sections, (d) the preprofessional or discipline-linked seminar and (e) the basic study skills seminar.

As part of a project aimed at transposing the logic of the FYS to a Belgian context at the University of Liège, particular attention was paid to 'the academic seminar on various topics across sections' (AFYSVTS) and their various qualities. They are primarily a valuable way to introduce freshmen to the challenges and requirements of university studies (Keup & Petschauer, 2011). These seminars also help them understand academic culture and introduce them to the context in which they are expected to adopt it (Tobolowsky & Associates, 2005). In addition, AFYSs are likely to develop academic skills such as critical thinking and place greater emphasis on writing skills (Saunders & Romm, 2008). Academic First-Year Seminars (AFYS) have become more popular than other types over the years (Tobolowsky & Associates, 2008). This popularity can be seen, for instance, in the many FYS catalogues offered by American universities, most of whose seminars seem to correspond more specifically to AFYSVTS, according to the authors who adopted the typology. However, the uses of this FYS typology, and the term "Academic Seminar" in particular, do not seem to have stabilised across all universities, nor are they always the subject of a consensus in the literature.

According to the scholars supporting this terminology (Gianoutsos, 2015; Keup & Petschauer, 2011; Hunter & Linder 2005; Barefoot, 1992), we propose a composite definition of AFYSVTS with the following criteria :

- Seminars are "theme-based courses whose primary focus is on academic theme/discipline"...
- "but will often include academic skills components" (Greenfield, Keup and Gardner, 2013, p.93)...
- whose "topics can vary from section to section"...
- and that are "fashioned most often on faculty members' individual areas of academic or personal interest and expertise" (Hunter & Linder 2005, p.280).

To give researchers, potential sponsors of AFYSVTS projects, and instructors a more concrete idea of the concept and the forms it can take, we have collected and compiled a corpus of over 750 occurrences of topics



and descriptions of seminars from the websites of no less than thirty American universities and colleges. The analysis/categorisation of the latter resulted in the AFYSVTS categories.

This paper has two main objectives, made possible by the design of this corpus. First (A), it presents an original typology of AFYSVTS directly derived from the analysis and categorisation work carried out by the team at the *Institut de Formation et de Recherche en Enseignement Supérieur* (IFRES) after the systematic constitution of the corpus. Secondly (B), it aims to present the use of this corpus as a teacher support tool developed in the context of the FYS implementation project at the University of Liège.

A) To build the corpus, we created a spreadsheet listing the FYSs offered by American universities for the 2023-2024 academic year, selected in order of appearance in the results of a search engine. A thematic analysis was then carried out in two steps. First, the themes and descriptions were read a first time by three researchers. Coding schemes corresponding to AFYSVTS subcategories emerged from this first reading. A consensus between the proposals of the three researchers regarding the categories and their names led to the emergence of five categories, AFYSVTS whose theme is :

- a) General academic themes - whose theme and discipline are vague and/or cover a broad field - (example: *Communication and Media Literacy*),
- b) Specific academic themes - whose theme and discipline are targeted, with a narrow focus – (example: *Shakespeare's the Tragedy of King Lear and The Tempest*),
- c) Pop culture topics - whose subject entry is a pop culture topic – (example: *Games of Thrones and the Logic of Political Survival*),
- d) Social issues / current affairs (example: *Rethinking Identity & Utopia: Race, Class & Gender in the 21st century*),
- e) Focusing on school and personal transition (example: *Who succeeds in College?*)

The researchers then coded the seminars using these five AFYSVTS categories. This categorisation process involved reaching an agreement and consensus among the researchers. We then quantified the occurrences of each category and we have already found that 'Specific Academic' AFYSVTS make up the largest proportion of seminars in the corpus, with 50.33%.

B) This corpus has led to the creation of a structured support tool, which is intended to serve as a bank of examples, as a source of inspiration for teachers, or simply to help them envision what AFYSVTS could look like. In addition to the categories, the seminars were further categorized by field and subject. These classifications allow teachers to select the seminars in a discipline that are relevant to them by selecting or sorting them in the table. In addition, a study of the FYS descriptions submitted by the universities has made it possible to highlight the methods and objectives of each of them by means of colour codes. The tool is therefore not only meant to inspire teachers in their choice of topic, but also to encourage them to reconsider other pedagogical components. The tool presented in this paper has been successfully used in a pilot project aimed at implementing and supporting AFYSVTS at the ULiège.

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