

Transposing American First-Year Seminars to a European University:  
introducing a step-by-step FYS design methodology synthesizing an extensive literature on FYE

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**Summary:**

In 2023, the University of Liège (ULiège), under the coordination of the Institute for Training and Research in Higher Education (IFRES), developed a project aiming to support faculty in the creation of a catalog of Academic First-Year Seminars with Various Topics across sections (AFYSVTS), transposing a type of first-year program implemented in many American universities in order to facilitate the transition to higher education (Keup & Petschauer, 2011). In this communication, we will present the various dimensions of the system developed to guide ULiège teachers in designing, delivering and regulating their AFYSVTS. It can be summarized through the POCPIM RIER acronym, which stands for Profile – Outcomes – Corpus – Posture of Instructor – Methods – Realization – Implementation – Evaluation – Regulation.

AFYSVTS are small courses (maximum 20 students) given by faculty members (instructors). Each seminar is based on the exchange of ideas and information around an academic topic related to the field of study. Structured to encourage students' active participation in learning and in the life of the institution, AFYSVTS help develop critical thinking and initial academic skills, as well as creating a community within the classroom. Accordingly, they facilitate the academic and social integration of freshmen (Hunter & Linder, 2005). In many universities, they are listed in catalogues from which students are asked to choose (Greenfield, Keup & Gardner, 2013).

This project, recognized in America for its effectiveness in offsetting “an increasingly academically disengaged population of first-year students” (Keup & Petchauer, 2011), seemed appropriate for the ULiège, where both faculty and the institution have been deploring a similar situation for years. However, its implementation was a challenge as, unlike in America where FYS is a long-standing and widespread practice (Greenfield, Keup and Gardner, 2013), this teaching format is quite distant from first-year teaching practices in Belgium.

During its pilot phase at ULiège, the project leaders tested the system in two medium-sized study programs (100-120 freshmen), each requiring the creation of five seminars. We offered them support (as recommended by Groccia & Hunter, 2012) and tools based on an extensive review of the FYS literature. On the one hand, we organised collective meetings between faculty from each field (leadership team); these served as moments of informed decision-making and as opportunities to create a community of practice within the group. Between these group meetings, individual meetings were held with academic advisers to facilitate the design of each personal seminar. The phasing of the general support system POCPIM RIER is an applied transposition of the logic of planning models such as ADDIE (Carré & Caspar, 2011) to AFYSVTS planning.

(P) Profile: needs analysis and consideration of contextual variables took the form of an assisted reflection by instructors based on a presentation of factors influencing the success or failure of first-year students (Romainville & Michaut, 2012; Dupont, De Clercq & Galand, 2015) and critical transition-related



requirements (Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). These inputs enabled instructors to profile their future students (Garner, 2012).

(O) Objective: from a list of 16 categories of objectives likely to be achieved by FYSs established by a literature review (Keup & Penaherrera, 2022; Murray & Wolf, 2016), the instructors selected those they wanted to target by assigning them a priority score. A calculation was used to democratically identify 4 or 5 objectives that would be common to all FYSs in the field.

(C) Corpus: each instructor chose his or her seminar topic. To inspire them and help them understand what FYS is, a structured tool with over 750 examples was built from over 30 American seminar catalogues (on the importance of examples: Brauer, 2011). This tool has led to the creation of a typology of AFYSVTS; it also makes it possible to enter this extensive corpus by selecting information in several ways (origin of the FYS, type, teaching field...).

(PI) Instructor's posture: identification of the recommended posture of the AFYS instructor, which departs from the habits of our first-year teachers. In particular, it requires imposing a form of active learning and framing interactions differently (Weimer, 2002; Keup & Petschauer, 2011) so as to create a classroom climate conducive to participation (Lacourse, 2014) and a sense of community between students and with the instructor (McKinney et al., 2006) that encourages learning.

(M) Methods: pre-selection of a series of specific methods that can be used within the AFYS framework, based on a repertoire compiled from the literature and descriptions in the corpus. The methods are designed to be informal, not very transmissive and engaging (Hunter and Linder, 2005).

(R) Realization : accompanied development, for each instructor, of a planning grid inspired by the logics of instructional design (Laurillard, 2012) and workload calculator (Beer, 2019); research and creation of concrete course materials, with the help of the accompanying team.

(I) Implementation: proposing the designed course to the class. During the implementation period, the support team remained available for feedback.

(E) Evaluation: based on the literature on FYS (e.g. Friedman, 2012), a bank of instruments drawn from research articles on First-Year programs (CEAFYE; RFYS; FYSQR SALG; SACQ; COS) and a focus group conducted with a few students after two seminar sessions, items have been compiled for a second general data collection at the end of the term. These will be supplemented by interviews with faculty, enabling quantitative and qualitative data to be cross-referenced in terms of perceived gains, satisfaction and activities carried out in the classroom. Data analysis in progress.

(R) Regulation: review of courses and support program based on data collection (to come).

Of the ten teachers involved in the coaching, nine completed the design process and delivered a seminar between September and December 2024, with extremely varied content. Initial results show that the seminars have had, among other things, a positive impact on students' perception of the accessibility of their teachers, on their reported ability to engage during class, to develop critical thinking or to interact and build links with their peers. According to their instructors, seminars were also described a “refreshing” and “rehumanizing” experience that also influenced for instance students' commitment to the traditional courses they taught.



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