Guidance and counseling process supporting the assessment of gained competence in RDI projects

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The working life oriented pedagogical models (e.g., Learning by Developing, Problem Based Learning, Innovation Pedagogy), which have been taken in use in the universities of applied sciences, have made a change in the curricula as well as in the methodological implementations of the study programs. However, they also require a change in the models and methods by which guidance and counseling (G&C) is implemented to guarantee effective study processes.

The article focuses on the G&C processes supporting student's working and competence-based assessment in project-based studies. The results are based on analysis of a tutor teacher's reflective diary in a development process, which was carried out together with Laurea University of Applied Sciences and the Osataan! project coordinated by HAAGA-HELIA School of Vocational Teacher Education. The development process took place during the academic year of 2013–2014. It involved renewing the G&C process in Laurea's working life-oriented RDI projects (HankeHops in Finnish) as well as testing and improving tools for the personalization of studies and competence assessment. The "tools", i.e., assessment forms, are available on the websites of the Osataan! project both in English and Finnish (http://blogit.haaga-helia.fi/osataan/tyokalut/). The project was carried out in three student groups from the Business Information Technology program (Group 1: 6 students, Group 2: 19 students and Group 3: 42 students).

Laurea's working life-oriented RDI projects are based on their pedagogical model of Learning by Developing (LbD). The role of the teacher supervising the students in projects is crucial. One of the authors of the present article has worked as a tutor teacher and his responsibilities were to organize the various phases of projects, to guide students in recognizing learning outcomes and competence generated by the projects as well as to help the students in understanding the competence areas, setting the goals and conducting self-assessment (see also Lassila & Pohjalainen, 2012).

Team-based guidance and counseling process

Students with personalized study programs need also personalized support time-wise and content-wise. This requires a lot of the teacher's time resources and makes the G&C process heavy and sometimes even impossible to fit in the full schedules. We were interested in making the teacher's workload reasonable when supervising the students, while still giving students enough support. We moved from the individual face-to-face meetings to meetings where the whole project group participated in the G&C session. The G&C process was designed to proceed in steps and the sessions were scheduled in advance to fit the critical phases in their project (Figure 1).
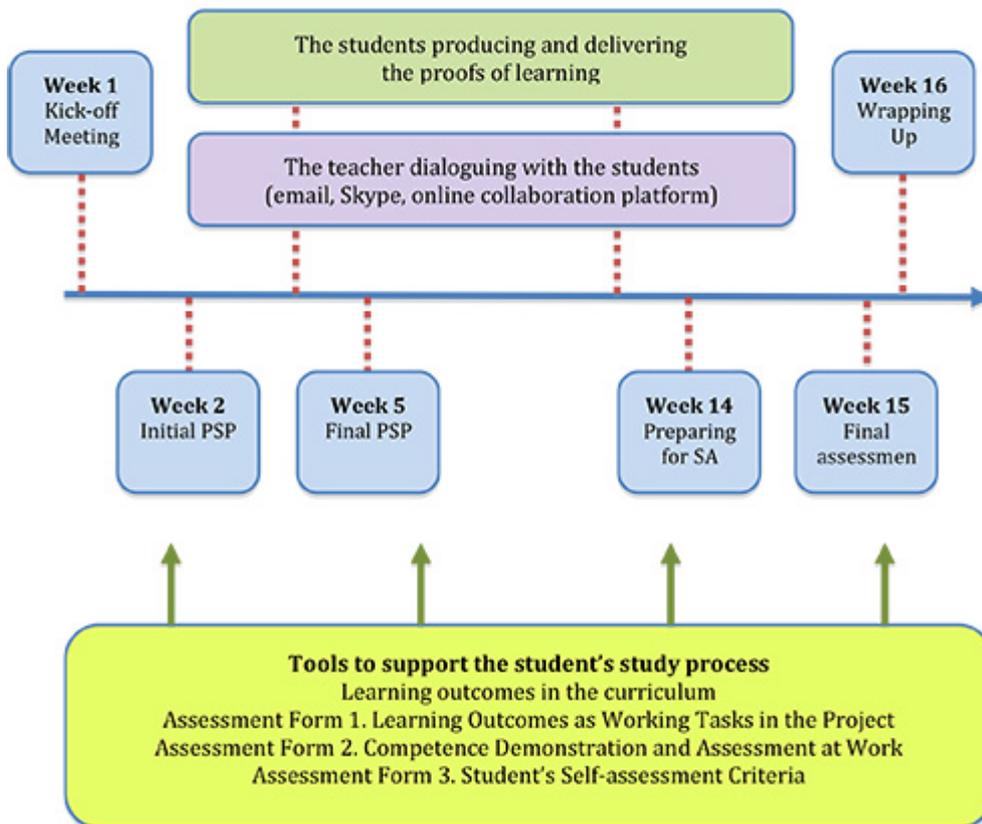
Figure 1. Guidance and counseling process in the working life-oriented RDI project.

The activities of the sessions in the G&C process were:

1. Kick-off Meeting, which included briefing the students about the study process in the project.

2. Initial Personal Study Plan (PSP), which included

- connecting the curriculum learning outcomes to the project objectives
- identifying an initial outline of the required knowledge base and proofs of learning
- connecting the Student's assessment criteria to the project objectives, knowledge base and proofs of learning.

3. Final Personal Study Plan (PSP), which included updating the information written in the previous step.

4. Preparing for the self-assessment (SA), which included reviewing and updating the PSP.

5. Final assessment, which included

- individual self-assessment
- peer-to-peer assessment
- assessment by the customer and other project members.

6. Wrapping up, which included

- the teacher and students debriefing the project and sharing opinions and experiences

- planning the students activities for next the semester (upcoming projects and courses).

Tools to help the teacher to monitor and guide the study processes

We designed tools (assessment forms), which made it possible for the student (1) to plan the actual work tasks and activities in the project in relation to the learning outcomes of the courses included in the project, (2) to plan how the proofs of learning are demonstrated in relation to the activities and deliverables in the project and (3) to assess the gained competences in relation to the assessment criteria.

When planning the G&C process we considered assessment as an inseparable part of guidance and counseling – in the G&C process the teacher needed information which was provided in the student's PSP and assessment forms. In addition, the process and tools of assessment depended on the conception of competence: in the LbD model competence is seen as an integrated combination of knowing, understanding, doing and managing situations. Therefore, assessment focuses on student's competence instead of the knowledge, written work or their project activities. (Raij & Niinistö-Sivuranta, 2011; see also Baartman et al. 2006, 4.) In our development process the student's competence was assessed in relation to the learning outcomes defined in the curriculum, and personalized in the PSP. The project work in itself (e.g., the action plans, designed products and artefacts) demonstrated the gained competence.

The student was asked to prepare for the G&C sessions by filling the PSP in advance in the beginning of study process, and thereafter to update it on the basis of the teacher's written feedback and the discussions in the G&C sessions. In that way the plans became more accurate descriptions of the student's progress. Reading and commenting the student's PSP often eliminated the need to meet face-to-face as illustrated in the tutor teacher's diary:

Using the PSP templates with some other students. I like the template and it helps my work as I don't need to keep too many face-to-face meetings with students. Reading what the student wrote in the document and directly writing my comments on it is a time effective way to provide guidance. Some students are using it very well. (Tutor teacher's diary 21.10.2013)

When having the whole project group participating in the G&C sessions the feedback could be discussed more time-effectively compared to individual meetings.

The student's self-assessments with the proofs of learning made it easier for the teacher to make his own assessments:

… Information written by the students in the team-self-assessment, individual self-assessment, and peer-to-peer evaluation quite well match with the subjective evaluation I have been able to make throughout the course. So, giving a grade to a student is almost about validating the evaluation from those three documents. (Tutor teacher's diary 27.5.2014)

The tutor teacher reflections on the developed G&C process were positive. The teacher found it more interesting as well as less controlling to be able to trust in students' abilities to manage their own learning process. However, the trust was not "blind", because the teacher was able to follow the students' activities and achievements throughout the semester.

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