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**Please cite the original version:** Denis, M. ; Escurra, L. & Tallgren, T. 2025. Transforming Traditional Teaching into Coaching Guidance in Working Life Connected Projects, INTED2025 Proceedings, pp. 1746-1754.

doi: 10.21125/inted.2025.0522

# TRANSFORMING TRADITIONAL TEACHING INTO COACHING GUIDANCE IN WORKING LIFE CONNECTED PROJECTS

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## Abstract

One of the primary missions of universities is to train future professionals, and this goal is not solely achieved through traditional teaching. Learning is often more enduring and profound when students engage in thinking, doing, and experimenting. This objective can be realized through an educational model known as Working Life Connected (WLC) project education. This model is based on Laurea University of Applied Sciences' pedagogical approach, Learning by Developing (LbD). LbD involves authentic collaboration between the working life, students, and lecturers, where students tackle real-life development tasks, and lecturers support their skill development through coaching guidance. Coaching guidance is a goal-oriented, insightful process in which, within a higher education environment, a student's resources and strengths are harnessed to help them to find their own solutions. The aim is to support the student's self-esteem, ability to identify opportunities, and find solutions. Coaching focuses on what the student wants to achieve, and the actions required to reach those goals. A lecturer as a coach does not solve the student's challenges for them but supports them through insightful questions, active listening, challenging their assumptions, and reinforcing their belief in success. This research article examines how the coaching training for lecturers achieved its goals as part of the HEIComp project. HEIComp ("Bridging the gap between students' competences and working life needs") is a European Union-funded initiative aimed at bringing higher education students closer to the job market. As part of the HEIComp teaching method training, higher education lecturers from Brazil and Paraguay were trained to work as coaches in WLC projects. The theoretical background of this article includes coaching guidance and the WLC project teaching methods. The target group of the study consists of Universidad Autónoma de Encarnación (UNAE) lecturers who coached their students for the first time in WLC projects assigned by companies. The research questions of this qualitative study were: 1) How do lecturers adopt the new role of a teacher as a coach? 2) How do lecturers master coaching teaching methods that enhance learning in WLC projects studies? The study was conducted in the fall of 2024, with the participation of eight lecturers from UNAE. The main result of the study shows that lecturers enhance their coaching skills through WLC projects. This is evident in evaluations highlighting aspects such as "students' autonomy", "decision making", "accompaniment", "trust", "teamwork" and "patience". Lecturers demonstrate proficiency in coaching teaching methods aimed at fostering students' critical and problem-solving skills on the part of students. Lecturers achieve this by asking insightful questions, providing useful feedback, and engaging in active listening, which are essential for adapting and being flexible in a dynamic context, much like in real working life. In conclusion, WLC projects promote the professional growth of both lecturers and students. Adopting the mindset and pedagogy of coaching guidance requires the lecturer to have various abilities to integrate them into the training. A successful transition from traditional teaching to coaching in the WLC project necessitates continuous teaching training. Such training is crucial for the lecturer's personal and professional development, contributing to high-quality education.

Keywords: Coaching Guidance, Coaching Skills, Working Life Connected Project, Quality Education.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The primary task of universities is to educate professionals with both career specific skills and general working life competencies. The World Economic Forum identifies core skills required by professionals in 2023, including analytical and creative thinking, self-efficacy skills such as resilience, flexibility, agility, self-awareness, and the ability to utilize technology. [1] These skills are not necessarily achieved through traditional lecture-based teaching alone. Learning is often more sustainable, profound, and motivating when students are active participants and can combine theory with real-life development tasks. Laurea University of Applied Sciences' (LUAS) pedagogical model, Learning by Developing (LbD), offers a concrete way to integrate studies with working life development and fosters genuine cooperation between working life, students, and lecturers. [2]

In the LbD model, studies are often conducted through Working Life Connected (WLC) project studies. In these projects, aimed at developing working life, the lecturer's role is to support the development of students' skills through coaching. This requires the lecturer to possess the ability and pedagogical expertise to shift from a traditional, teacher-led approach to a coaching style that supports and motivates students' self-efficacy. Coaching involves a goal-oriented and insightful guidance process, utilizing the student's resources and strengths to help them find their own insights and solutions. As a coach, the lecturer does not provide direct answers or solve challenges for the student but supports them through insightful questions, active listening, feedback, challenging, and reinforcing belief in success. The aim is to bolster the student's professional self-esteem and development of working life skills. [3, 4, 5, 6]

This research article examines the success of transitioning from traditional pedagogy to coaching within the HEIComp project. HEIComp ("Bridging the Gap between Students' Competences and Working Life Needs") is a European Union-funded initiative aimed at bringing higher education students closer to the job market. As part of the HEIComp teaching method training, higher education lecturers from Brazil and Paraguay were trained to teach as coaches in WLC projects. The theoretical section of this article discusses the meaning of coaching guidance in WLC pedagogy and presents its key principles and tools within the context of working life projects. The study presents results from the HEIComp project, where eight lecturers from Universidad Autónoma de Encarnación (UNAE) coached students in business collaboration projects instead of lecturing for the first time in the fall of 2023. This qualitative study examined how UNAE lecturers transitioned from traditional lecture-based teaching to coaching guidance and how they mastered coaching methods. [7]

## **2 PRINCIPLES OF COACHING GUIDANCE AND THE COACH'S MINDSET**

Coaching guidance combines the solution-focused coaching process with the philosophy of coaching leadership. Solution-focused coaching emphasizes utilizing the strengths and resources of an individual or team to achieve goals. Coaching is a way of being and thinking, not just a collection of methods and techniques. The core idea is that the coachee is the expert of their own life, and the coach's role is to support them in finding their own solutions and insights. The coaching process typically involves five stages, beginning with goal setting. The second stage is identifying the person's resources and strengths. Coaching progresses by leveraging these strengths to support the achievement of new goals. The coachee then creates a concrete action plan to reach their objectives, advancing step by step. Coaching is based on active listening, providing insights, challenging assumptions, and strengthening the belief in one's abilities. [5]

Coaching leadership is a management style that emphasizes the development, well-being, and support of employees in their work. The goal is to create a trusting, interactive, and psychologically safe work environment where employees feel valued and motivated to give their best for the company's success. A coaching leader encourages employees to take responsibility for their own work, which is particularly important in today's work environment. The leader is responsible for clarifying the company's purpose and goals, sparring, supporting creative thinking, and providing encouraging feedback, while also challenging employees' thinking to help them find their own solutions. The key focus of coaching leadership is to transform the previous leadership culture in the workplace, which often concentrated on mistakes and areas for improvement. By focusing on successes and analyzing the work behind them, better results can often be achieved. Sharing successes is also an effective way to support an individual's work. Recognizing successes, providing positive feedback, and showing appreciation from the team strengthen new achievements. [8]

Coaching guidance and mindset in education are reflected in the way lecturers interact and work with students. The focus is on open communication and commitment, being actively present, and positively curious about the student's thinking and resources during guidance situations. The key is to focus on solutions rather than problems, strengths rather than weaknesses, and what is going well rather than failures. "Not teaching" means avoiding overly direct instructions or answers. Instead, the team's own insights are supported using coaching tools such as dialogue, clarification, challenging thinking, giving feedback, and above all, highlighting successes. The goal is to strengthen the team's abilities, self-confidence, enthusiasm, and insights, and to develop students' skills to become self-directed professionals in future work life. [5, 8, 20]

Coaching guidance can be applied to all forms of education. It is best implemented in a curriculum that supports the holistic development of students, not just academic theoretical knowledge. A student-centered approach is also important. Encouraging students to take an active role and responsibility in their learning process strengthens their self-efficacy and professional confidence. The curriculum

content should integrate theory and practice, allowing students to deepen their learning and apply it in real working contexts. This simultaneously supports the development of general work-life skills. Additionally, the curriculum's assessment model should include continuous feedback, helping students develop and achieve their goals. Part of the assessment should also involve students reflecting on their own competencies. [9]

## **2.1 Strengthening Student Self-Efficacy, Resilience and Emotional Intelligence**

Working life increasingly requires individuals to have self-efficacy and resilience, which are often more significant for success than mere intelligence. Self-efficacious and resilient employees tend to pursue professional goals more determinedly. Additionally, emotional intelligence is crucial for many reasons, affecting both personal well-being and the success of teamwork. All three of these core competencies can be practiced in a psychologically safe environment as part of WLC project studies with coaching guidance. [1, 5, 11,12]

The starting point of coaching is to strengthen the student's realistic self-efficacy belief, ensuring that obstacles hindering their thinking are recognized and do not diminish their courage to act. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to succeed and cope in various challenging situations, as well as to avoid paralyzing thoughts. Experiences of success strengthen self-efficacy, while failures weaken it. A student's self-efficacy is a crucial resource for success in studies and future working life. It prevents the student from setting goals that are too low, and brings motivation, energy, and persistence to pursue goals. Students also need to strengthen their resilience skills. Resilience fundamentally means positive adaptation to prevailing conditions and maintaining functionality despite difficulties and setbacks. These skills are crucial and become evident when studies are carried out in collaboration with working life. Genuine work-life development project assignments are often fast-paced, with changing plans that require agility and creative thinking. Correct or incorrect solutions cannot always be predetermined, so one must trust the development process and endure setbacks. Such situations demand but also develop students' resilience. [5, 6,11]

Emotional intelligence positively impacts both individual well-being and the work community. It helps in understanding and managing one's own emotions, as well as recognizing and responding to others' emotions, which enhances workplace interactions. Emotionally intelligent employees are better equipped to handle conflicts constructively. They foster a sense of trust and belonging within the team, which is crucial for psychological safety. This ability helps in recognizing signs of stress and developing effective ways to manage it, promoting well-being at work and reducing the risk of burnout. For leaders, emotional intelligence is especially important as it enables them to lead teams empathetically and inspiringly, thereby improving team performance and commitment. [12]

## **2.2 Coaching Guidance in Working Life Connected Projects**

The WLC project-based learning model has been used at LUAS for 15 years in the Business Management bachelor's program at the Hyvinkää and Tikkurila campuses. WLC involves genuine collaboration between working life, students, and lecturers, where students tackle real-life development tasks, and lecturers support their skill development through coaching guidance. The model was previously known as Peer-to-Peer (P2P). Projects typically consist of seven students, span 15 ECTS, and last for one semester. During this time, the team carries out an assignment given by a company and writes a theoretical foundation to support the practical implementation. The supervising lecturer meets with the team regularly in weekly meetings and additionally supports the students' project work by commenting on and providing feedback on their outputs. The team maintains active interaction with the working life partner and regularly presents the project's progress and achieved results. The goal of coaching guidance in the WLC is to support and encourage students to find their own solutions or alternatives to various development needs in business collaboration projects. This approach is based on creating a safe learning environment, being present, encouraging, challenging, and providing feedback. The lecturer helps the team gain insights by asking questions that bring out different perspectives, rather than teaching or advising directly. The main objective of the guidance is to strengthen the team's capabilities, self-confidence, enthusiasm, and insights. [3, 4, 13, 14]

According to previous studies, WLC projects train students in many future work-life skills such as communication and leadership skills, problem-solving, creativity, and teamwork. The research results also confirm that students gain a better understanding of business concepts and practices. Executing real working life projects provides students with numerous opportunities to strengthen their self-

development, self-efficacy, resilience, and emotional intelligence. The student's future employment is supported by professional networking, project management experience, and evidence of successful development assignments. [3, 4, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19]

A lecturer cannot always act solely as a coach in the university environment. There are three other equally important roles that are situational. The lecturer always has a leadership role, where they are responsible for the development of the student's professional skills according to the curriculum (leader). There are also situations where it is beneficial for the lecturer to act as an expert in their field, sharing their knowledge through lectures or other means (expert). The lecturer is always responsible for assessing the students' studies. Additionally, there are situations where the lecturer must take on a management role, addressing potential disruptive behavior, absences, or conflicts within teams (manager). The lecturer also has the responsibility to recognize and support students with learning difficulties or other special needs, ensuring they do not have to cope alone. [5, 8, 20]

### 2.3 Coaching Guidance Process and Tools

In WLC projects, coaching supports students with assignments from real-life partners. The coach's guidance is flexible and adapts to different situations. The key is for the coach to trust the process and the team's ability to grow, solve problems, and reach their goals. The journey can be challenging and may involve uncertainty. Even the coach might not always know the right answers right away; they develop as the project goes on. It's important to support the team and encourage them to think independently and creatively. The team should have the freedom to make decisions and learn from mistakes. Often, the best ideas come from trying new things. However, the coach also needs to ensure students' professional growth. This means the coach has certain responsibilities and methods to support the team while allowing them enough freedom. These methods help students apply what they learn in real work situations. [5, 20]

At the start of the project, the coach creates a positive learning environment with open communication, making students feel safe and valued. This is done by helping the team come together and set their own team rules. When the development target of the project is known, the coach guides the students to use methods that help in achieving the objectives for the project. One of the most well-known methods is the GROW model [5]. It is a clear tool for defining goals and actions, clarifying, focusing, solving problems, and mutual understanding. The GROW consists of the following stages: "Goal" - defines what the team wants to achieve. The first stage includes setting clear and achievable goals. "Reality" - assessing the current situation. The second stage helps understand where the students currently stand with their goal, identifying obstacles, and focusing strengths and resources. "Options" - exploring different options to achieve the goal. The third stage encourages creative thinking and finding alternative strategies and solutions. "Will" - Developing an action plan. The final stage involves students deciding on concrete steps, setting timelines, and monitoring progress. [5, 20].

As the project progresses, the coach's most important methods are regular meetings with students and engaging in dialogue with them. The key to successful dialogue is active listening. This means the coach listens attentively and understands the speaker's emotions and non-verbal messages. Through listening, trust is built within the team, allowing them to speak openly about their challenges and conveying empathy. Genuine listening shows students that the lecturer values their perspectives. Giving full attention means listening without interruptions. The coach should also reflect on what they hear and verify their interpretations with questions. The coach also provides feedback, which helps students gain new insights and perspectives. For lecturers, active listening and giving space to students' viewpoints can initially be challenging. In the traditional education model, lecturers have had an active role in speaking and giving direct instructions. [5, 20]

The coach's second key method to support dialogue is asking open-ended questions to help students find their own solutions and new perspectives. This process called insights increases students' commitment and enthusiasm for the solutions they discover, making the learning experience stronger and more lasting because insights encourage deeper reflection. Insightful questions should help students to consider different perspectives. For example: "*What options do you have in this situation?*" or "*What different perspectives can you see in this situation?*" or "*What is the most important thing you want to achieve in this situation?*" It is important to listen actively and patiently waiting for the students' responses before new questions. [5, 20]

The third essential tool for a coach is sharing and giving feedback, which helps students achieve their goals. Regular feedback is a natural part of guidance and a key source of learning, increasing students' motivation. Feedback from the coach helps students understand what they are doing and decide what

to do next and what to change. Feedback starts with the student's own reflection before adding the coach's perspective. The coach should provide both positive and learning feedback. (In coaching culture, the term "constructive feedback" is avoided). Good feedback also challenges students to step out of their comfort zone and avoid easy or narrow solutions. The feedback process helps develop students' independence, increases their self-confidence, and enhances their problem-solving skills. As a coach, always remember to acknowledge and highlight your team's achievements. This will increase their commitment and motivation and strengthen their resilience in challenging situations. [5, 20]

Overall, educational coaching process helps students become self-efficacy, motivated, and more capable of achieving their academic and career goals. This process is successful when the lecturer is ready to transform from traditional teaching into coaching guidance.

### 3 METHODOLOGIES

This qualitative study examined how eight UNAE lecturers transitioned from traditional lecture-based teaching to coaching guidance as part of the HEIComp teaching method training pilot program in fall 2023. In this pilot, the UNAE coach first completed a virtual WLC training course, which included a theoretical package on coaching guidance. Secondly, a Laurea lecturer supported the UNAE coach during the first real-life WLC project by having virtual meetings once a month with an agreed theme. (Figure 1).

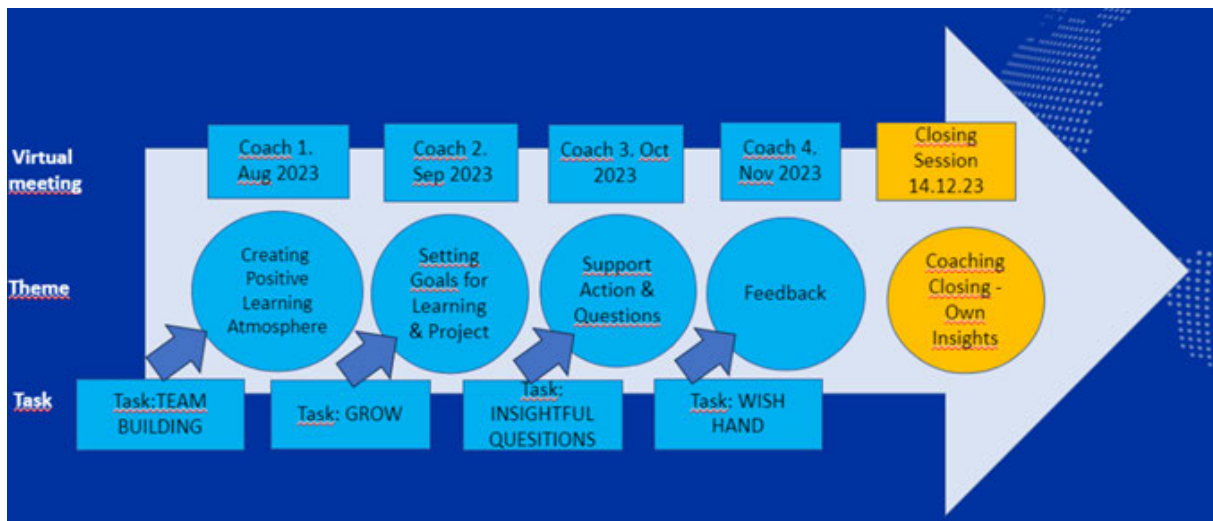


Figure 1. HEIComp teaching method training program

The first WLC local pilot projects were implemented with three companies, UNAE lecturers and their students applied WLC methodology in a genuine working life development target. (Table 1).

Table 1. Local pilots.

Company	UNAE's coaches
Company 1	UNAE's coach 1 + UNAE's coach 2 + UNAE's coach 3 + UNAE's coach 4
Company 2	UNAE's coach 5 + UNAE's coach 6
Company 3	UNAE's coach 7 + UNAE's coach 8

To examine how the coaching training for UNAE lecturers achieved its goals as part of the HEIComp project, lecturers had to reflect on their own professional development as a coach through showcase portfolios (Illustration 1 and 2). The portfolios of eight lecturers were analyzed and the analysis of the responses was conducted using a qualitative, descriptive methodology by creating thematic categories along two dimensions: 1) How do lecturers adopt the new role of a teacher as a coach? 2) How do lecturers master coaching teaching methods that enhance learning in WLC project studies?



Illustration 1. Showcase portfolio by one of the UNAE lecturer.

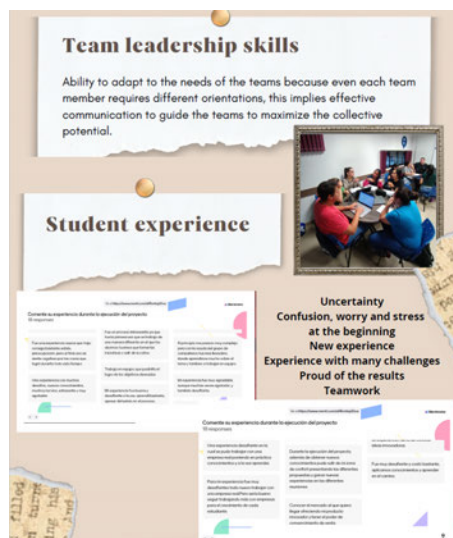


Illustration 2. Showcase portfolio by one of the UNAE lecturer guides.

## 4 RESULTS

### 4.1 How Do Lecturers Adopt the New Role as a Coach?

The transition to a coaching role for lecturers involves several key changes and the acquisition of new skills. The study indicates that lecturers have shifted from a traditional approach to a coaching approach, focusing on accompanying and facilitating rather than giving direct answers. Lecturers highlighted concepts such as “independence,” “autonomous decision-making,” and “self-management.” This reflects a coaching style that centers on the student, allowing them to develop autonomy and make informed choices. However, this shift created challenges for lecturers, requiring them to step out of their comfort zones and allow students to find answers independently. This approach also demands trust and patience from the educators. Lecturers noted the importance of developing skills such as “trust in students,” “joint decision-making,” and “team organization.” These insights suggest a transformation from traditional authority figures to dynamic mentors who guide and trust their students’ capabilities.

## 4.2 How Do Lecturers Master Coaching Teaching Methods That Enhance Learning in WLC Project Studies?

The data indicates that the teaching methods used are aligned with WLC objectives, emphasizing skills such as active listening, asking insightful questions and providing useful feedback, which are foundational competencies to adjust to the changing real working environment. The lecturers highlighted skills such as “insightful questioning”, “constructive feedback” “active listening”, “reflection” and “effective questioning”. These insights demonstrate how they have integrated coaching as a pedagogical tool, adapting their teaching techniques to encourage students to think critically and solve problems. Moreover, applying these skills also contributes to creating a safe learning environment, which aligns with the concept of coaching leadership. Lecturers emphasized the importance of “being flexible in the face of change” and “adapting to the team's needs”. These qualities reflect their mastery of progressive coaching, vital in a work-life context where projects and needs can rapidly evolve and demand adaptability and flexibility.

The competencies identified as “conflict resolution”, “time management”, “communication skills” and “team motivation” reveal the development of practical and managerial skills, essential for the work environment. This suggests that the coaching process not only enriches students but also enhances lecturers' competencies applicable in various contexts. Lecturers reported that their experiences in coaching training were enriching both personally and professionally, emphasizing “motivating interaction” and a “new sense of caring”. This indicates that the coaching process positively influences their teaching practice and personal growth, suggesting that this approach benefits not only students but also enhances lecturers' professional satisfaction.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Based on this study, it can be concluded that WLC projects promote the professional growth of both lecturers and students. Adopting the mindset and pedagogy of coaching guidance requires lecturers to have various abilities to integrate them into their training. In the case studied, lecturers perceived improvements in both soft and hard skills, indicating a comprehensive enhancement in their teaching profiles for developing students' competencies. A successful transition from traditional teaching to coaching in the WLC project necessitates continuous training in the application of the methodology and all its details, such as open questions, learning feedback, and active listening. Such training is crucial for the lecturer's personal and professional development, contributing to high-quality education. This transition also involves stepping out of their comfort zones and moving towards student-centered education, which underscores the importance of patience and trust in the learning process, as well as flexibility in adapting to the changing contexts of working life. Additionally, coaching methods contribute to creating a safe learning environment, aligned with coaching leadership, where students feel supported to explore and develop their skills.

Despite the positive aspects, it should be borne in mind that this study is based on ‘self-perception’. The perception of the participating students about the lecturers should be considered. Also, it should be considered, on the one hand, that it would be ideal to compare the results between the participating institutions, as well as the vision of the companies since behind each Project there were always coordinating lecturers who were in contact with the companies. Finally, in terms of the sustainability strategy foreseen for this type of project, aspects such as the following should be considered: Continuous application of the WLC methodology by the trained guidance lecturers, dissemination and training carried out by the institution so that other lecturers adopt the WLC methodology, adjustment of curricular programs to the WLC methodology projects, to facilitate their implementation and continuity.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

HEIComp (“Bridging the gap between students' competences and working life needs”) is a European Union-funded projects and it's initiative aimed at bringing higher education students closer to the job market.

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