UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Family Counselling: Theory and Practice (blended)

2627-1-F8502R003

Course title

The Search for Beauty. Observing, acting, put stories in motion

Topics and course structure

In this course, we will explore together an approach to pedagogy that stems from relationships, bodily feeling, and collective reflection to care for beauty in educational settings. Beauty is not an ornament, but a form of knowledge, an embodied knowing, and a responsibility toward oneself, others, and the world.
We will study the core concepts and methods of systemic pedagogy and epistemology to understand how to use them in interpreting interactions and transforming complex educational situations. We will put these concepts into practice through activities, exercises, dialogues, and reflective tools. We will use narrative, aesthetic, and bodily languages to engage emotions, senses, and imagination.
The goal is to learn to "think in stories" (Bateson) rather than solely through categories and judgments. You will learn to ask and generate generative questions to open up possibilities in interviews, meetings with families and teams, and pedagogical counseling. We will use stories brought by working students and analyze scenes from movies and TV series through a systemic lens, to learn how to read the context, position ourselves reflexively and responsively, work in teams, formulate complex hypotheses, design interventions, and act with ethical and relational awareness.
What do you need?
Curiosity, openness, and a willingness to engage with your mind, heart, and body. Plus a journal to keep track of your journey, which combines theory, practice, and personal transformation.

Objectives

The course aims to develop reflexivity within the field of systemic pedagogy, promoting a deep understanding of relationships, context, and transformative processes in educational and social services.
Specifically, this course intends to support the following learning outcomes:

1. Knowledge and understanding

- Know and understand the concepts and principles of systemic theory and their applications in pedagogical counseling: families and teams as systems, networks of services, system properties, coordinated management of meaning, interdependence, etc.
- Know and understand systemic models of learning and knowledge construction: relationship with knowledge, logical levels, structural coupling, collective mind, transformative learning.
- Know and understand the foundations of contextual analysis: mandate, demand, posture, metacommunication, management of meaning, professional network.
- Know and understand the theories of the aesthetic approach to knowledge: embodiment, enactment, aesthetic languages, thinking through stories.

2. Applying knowledge and understanding

- Use systemic concepts and methods to interpret concrete real or virtual situations, connecting theory and practice.
- Observe and analyze interactive episodes (e.g., movie scenes, classroom simulations, field experiences) to multiply possible interpretations.
- Conduct systemic mapping and hypothesize on real cases presented by the professor, students, and external guest speakers.
- Design pedagogical interventions for systemic counseling, supervision, or training aimed at families and/or professional teams and networks.

3. Making judgments

- Develop systemic reflective skills: collaboration, criticality, curiosity, and creativity.
- Develop emotional self-reflection and ethical positioning within relationships and contexts.
- Analyze one's own relational postures and their pragmatic effects in different contexts.

4. Communication skills

- Develop the ability to communicate from a first-person perspective in self-reflective and autoethnographic writing, as well as in oral communication.
- Develop responsiveness in concrete conversations (e.g., in the classroom or during fieldwork).
- Know how to adapt language and communication registers to different organizational, professional, and informal contexts.
- Formulate generative questions in counseling and co-design contexts.
- Improve language skills (English, but also others).

5. Learning skills

- Develop the ability to re-elaborate and organize knowledge.
- Develop the ability to receive and request critical feedback.
- Develop the ability to recognize, revise, and expand frames of meaning/the relational context (transformative learning).

Methodologies

The course is delivered in Italian.

The program consists of 39 hours of in-person lectures + 17 hours of online teaching. The online portion includes 6 synchronous hours (one-and-a-half-hour lectures in the late afternoon to facilitate participation for non-attending students) and 9 asynchronous hours (video lectures and individual exercises).
Lecturing (the presentation of theories and concepts by the professor) accounts for about 30% of the course, while 70% will be conducted interactively through discussion-based lectures, group work, exercises, case studies, and role-plays.

In this course, you will not be a mere spectator: you will be an active participant in a collective process of transformative learning. We will work in a dialogic, experiential, and reflective manner—just like teams that adopt a systemic model—alternating between theory and practice, the individual and the collective. Your perspective, experiences, and questions will be fundamental to co-constructing meaning.
Therefore, you will participate in dialogic lectures, where concepts are explored through examples, questions, and narratives. You will engage in activities utilizing diverse languages: verbal, bodily, aesthetic, and narrative. You will keep track of your own journey of awareness, making connections and becoming conscious of your learning. You will work cooperatively on projects and hypotheses, simulating professional situations. You will also use materials and forums to deepen your understanding, exchange ideas, and build knowledge beyond the classroom.
Finally, you will write a reflective paper on a meaningful experience, which we will discuss together during the oral examination.

In short: we work with the mind, the heart, the body, and relationships. We do not ask for perfection, but for openness, curiosity, and the courage to truly reflect.

Online and offline teaching materials

Teaching materials are uploaded to the platform (video lectures, recorded lessons, readings, stories), some materials will be provided by the students themselves.

Programme and references

The course programme is the same for attending and non attending students.

The standard program for the exam entails 2 mandatory books and a third elective book on a specific topic for further study. Or: 4-5 research papers (total pages: at least 90).

Mandatory books for the students who read Italian

Formenti L. (a cura di) Le regole della bellezza. Pedagogia sistemica in azione Franco Angeli, 2024. (in uscita a ottobre)
Formenti L. Formazione e trasformazione. Un modello complesso. Raffaello Cortina, 2017.

More books for elective choice:
Sclavi M., Arte di ascoltare e mondi possibili. Come si esce dalle cornici di cui siamo parte, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2003.
Luraschi, S. Le vie della riflessività. Per una pedagogia del corpomente. Armando, 2021.
Formenti L. Re-inventare la famiglia. Guida teorico-pratica per i professionisti dell'educazione. Apogeo, 2012. (only for students who did not attend Pedagogia della famiglia at Laurea Triennale in Scienze dell'Educazione)
Riflessioni sistemiche (rivista, numeri monografici):

- Il corpo nella relazione con il mondo, N. 34, giugno 2026 https://www.aiems.eu/pubblicazioni/rs_collezione/rs34
- Attraversando la crisi: contesti, problemi e possibili soluzioni, N. 33, dicembre 2025 https://www.aiems.eu/pubblicazioni/rs_collezione/rs33
- Relazioni e cura, N. 30, giugno 2024 https://www.aiems.eu/pubblicazioni/rs_collezione#h.eepgmeiaexjm (anche altri numeri possono essere scelti autonomamente)

For students who are not fluent in Italian, prof. Formenti can help to identify books in English that are relevant for the course.

About papers:

Prioritize the articles presented in class, choose from the bibliographies suggested on the e-learning platform, or search for new scientific sources—provided they are relevant—if you wish to explore specific topics in depth. Pay attention to the epistemological framework of the chosen texts. To personalize your learning, motivated changes to the exam syllabus can be agreed upon with the professor

Assessment methods

There will be no mid-term assessments. Only the final exam is scheduled.

The examination consists of two closely integrated parts, designed to assess both theoretical knowledge and the reflective and practical skills developed during the course:

- Reflective Essay: Students are required to write an essay focusing on a meaningful experience (drawn from internships, fieldwork, or classroom analysis). The essay must connect personal and professional experience with the theoretical and epistemological models of systemic pedagogy covered in the reading list. The essay must be submitted via the e-learning platform at least 10 days before the exam date.
- Oral Examination: The oral exam will start with a critical discussion of the reflective essay and expand to cover the core concepts of the required textbooks and the elective book. Assessment will focus on the student's capacity for ethical positioning, mastery of terminology, and personal re-elaboration.

The assessment method aligns with the course learning objectives: it helps you connect theory and practice, develop reflexivity and critical thinking, and position yourself mindfully regarding the topics addressed.

The Reflexive Essay: How to Write It
It is an argumentative text written from a first-person perspective.
It answers the question: "What did I learn, and how?" based on the analysis of a concrete experience.
It is not a theoretical essay, nor is it a summary of the concepts studied (the most frequent mistake).
It starts from the account of a real experience; therefore, you must present the experience (what was observed and how). You will analyze it using the language and methods of systemic counseling, also practicing self-reflection (through which lenses did I observe and interpret?).
The text must demonstrate to the reader that you have acquired the knowledge, skills, and competences outlined in the course learning outcomes.
It must contain explicit references to the course bibliography, with correct citations (APA 7th style), and develop a satisfactory theoretical framework.
The style is personal (written in the first person) but not subjective. It is based on arguments, not on personal judgments or opinions.

Formal requirements for the essay
Length: 8–10 numbered pages (excluding the cover page and bibliography).
Format: Word (.doc or .docx) or PDF.

Font: Your choice, legible (e.g., Times New Roman 12).
Line Spacing: 1.5 – Margins: 2.5 cm on all sides.
Bibliography: All books included in the exam syllabus; additional sources are permitted. Follow APA 7th edition rules.

The cover page must include:
First and last name Student ID number (Matricola)
Essay title and optional image
Degree program and Course name, Professor's name (also indicate who read a previous version of the essay), Academic year
Specification of whether you are an attending or non-attending student

Essay Submission
The essay must be uploaded to the repository (e-learning platform) at least 10 days before the exam date. The repository will open a few days before the deadline. Do not send the essay via email. Never use Moodle's internal messaging system. For doubts or questions, always use the general forum on elearning.

Oral Examination
The oral exam begins with a discussion of the essay, aimed at deepening, clarifying, and integrating its contents. If the essay does not include sufficient use of the theoretical texts, supplementary evaluation questions may be asked. Please bring the studied textbooks to the oral exam.

Evaluation
The essay receives generative qualitative feedback, published in the online register the day before the oral exam. Everyone can access the oral exam, even when the essay has severe limitations. The final grade (out of 30) takes into account both the essay and the oral performance.

Assessment Criteria (a list of criteria, discussed and enriched with the students, is published every year on Drive to allow for self-assessment)

- Academic correctness and appropriateness of the written text.
- Correct and in-depth use of theory (references to the texts and the course).
- Conceptual clarity and accurate understanding of the texts.
- Observational, critical, and reflective skills in analyzing the experience.
- Quality of the oral discussion.

Grading Scale
30 with Honors–28 (Excellent/Very Good): Excellent ability to connect theory and practice, deep and mature reflective writing, flawless use of systemic lexicon, and outstanding independent judgment.
27–25 (Good): Sound knowledge of the contents, well-structured essay with correct theoretical connections, fluent oral delivery, and appropriate terminology. Limits in self-reflexivity and/or in full appropriation and correct application of systemic methods.
24 – 21 (Fair/Satisfactory): Rote or partial knowledge of the texts, descriptive essay with few theoretical connections, and uncertainties in using the specific lexicon.
20 – 18 (Pass/Barely Sufficient): Minimum understanding of core concepts, predominantly anecdotal essay lacking real systemic re-elaboration, and weaknesses during the oral exam.
Fail (Insufficient): Lack of knowledge of core concepts, essay with severe deficiencies, and absence of critical self-reflexivity.

Office hours

Prof. Formenti receives upon appointment and only if strictly necessary. Students' tutoring (e.g. about exames) is

delivered through the forum in the e-learning platform and during the dedicated meetings in streaming.

Programme validity

Programmes' duration is 2 academic years.

Course tutors and assistants

Valentina Calciano, pedagogist, coordinator Lab'O
Antonella Cuppari, PhD, psychologist, pedagogist, responsible disability services
Andrea Di Martino, teacher, external collaborator
Gabriele Greggio, pedagogista, musicoterapeuta, assegnista
Marcella Lisi, pedagogist, coordinator "Signori bambini" service for children and families
Silvia Luraschi, PhD, pedagogist, independent researcher, Feldenkrais teacher, systemic counsellor
Sonia Mastroeni, pedagogist, external collaborator
Silvia Pinciroli, pedagogist, systemic counsellor, trainer Lab'O, lecturer (laboratories)
Mara Pirotta, pedagogist, systemic counsellor, traineeship tutor, lecturer (laboratories)
Andrea Prandin, pedagogist, systemic counsellor, trainer and supervisor
Maddalena Rossi, teacher, external collaborator
Federica Vergani, pedagogist, systemic counsellor, psychomotor therapist

Sustainable Development Goals

GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING | QUALITY EDUCATION | GENDER EQUALITY | REDUCED INEQUALITIES | PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS | PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS