

Teaching Ideas for Systemic Therapy Educators

By Dr Kate Owen

Clinical Psychologist and Clinical Family Therapist

A practical list of experiential and reflective teaching strategies to support systemic therapy learning in meaningful, embodied ways.

1. Role Plays and Skills Practice

Use structured vignettes or open-ended scenarios depending on learners' confidence levels. Practice techniques to build fluency and comfort with systemic interventions.

2. Live Demonstrations

Respond to real-time learner questions by stepping into the therapist role and modelling interventions.

3. Therapist Hot Seat

Facilitate “tag-team” role plays where trainees take turns being the therapist, building on each other's responses. This playful method promotes creativity, group learning, and spontaneous clinical thinking.

4. Scripted Interview Practice

Provide example questions (e.g., externalising questions in Narrative Therapy) to help learners rehearse techniques. Scripts build confidence before students move into more improvised and fluent use with clients.

5. Video Analysis of Master Therapists

Watch clips of influential figures (e.g., Minuchin, Satir, Michael White), then discuss their techniques, intentions, and impact. Encourage learners to consider how they would approach the situation differently.

6. Recorded Clinical Vignettes

Record videos reenacting textbook case studies with colleagues. These pair written material with visual learning, grounding abstract ideas in real-world examples.

7. Using Mainstream Films

Show clips from popular films (e.g., *Encanto*) to explore family roles, intergenerational patterns, secrets, and relational expectations. This makes theoretical content more accessible and memorable.

8. Live Supervision with One-Way Mirror

Use treating and observing teams with real clients, or mock clients, using a one way mirror. Teach the Reflecting Team format, consultation messages, and meta-level thinking.

9. Case Consultations and Mapping Exercises

Collaboratively map client cases using systemic concepts. Encourage hypothesis building, theoretical application, and exploration of multiple intervention pathways.

10. Personal Practice Vignettes

Share examples from your own clinical work to illustrate key ideas and invite open group discussion. This models transparency and critical reflection in action.

11. Use of Metaphors

Explain complex systemic concepts using everyday metaphors. Metaphors make abstract ideas relatable, memorable, and easier to integrate into practice.

12. Self-Reflection Activities

Provide self-reflection sheets for learners to document insights, questions, and links to their own practice. This supports deeper integration of learning and professional identity development.

13. Supplemental Learning Resources

Offer take-home supports like blogs, YouTube clips, and cheat sheets. These reinforce key ideas and support learners between sessions.

14. Tailor Experiential Learning to Each Therapy Model

Systemic models each have a unique philosophy and clinical style. Tailoring experiential learning to match the logic of each model helps students move from knowing to *embodying* the work and can help students grasp the underlying spirit – not just the techniques – of each approach. Here's how this might look:

- **Structural Family Therapy – Role Play with Coaching**
Practice enactments, boundary-setting, and hierarchical shifts through structured role play. Offering live coaching to model directive interventions in-the-moment demonstrates Structural concepts and allows the trainee to experience what they are being taught to do with families.
- **Narrative Therapy – The Power of Stories**
Invite learners to tell a story about their journey into the helping profession.
- **Satir Model – Guided Meditation to Meet Inner Parts**
Use guided meditation to explore internal parts and emotional congruence.