DEMOCRATIC SENSIBILITY

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to outline the concept of democratic sensibility, which is one of the key concepts being further developed and explored in the AECED Project. The concept refers to a quality that aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD) is intended to nurture and that is important to democracy-as-becoming (i.e., democracy as a process of continuous relational creation and becoming towards future possibilities).

In the early stages of the project, the purpose of AELD was described as to enhance a feel for democracy. The participatory action research in the AECED project has shown participants reporting growing awareness through engagement with AELD of themselves and others, and the relations between them. For example, they described examples of growth in empathy, ethical sensitivity, self-awareness, openness to embodied and emotional ways of knowing, sensitivity to feelings and bodily senses in democratic activity, and mutual listening and reflexivity. Through what we have found in the research, we are now able to better understand, articulate and expand upon this 'feel' through the concept of democratic sensibility[1].

The concept of democratic sensibility is the quality of being attentive to, appreciating, nurturing and responding to senses, awareness, attributes and feelings vital for the flourishing of democratic practice and relations. This paper elaborates on the concept and explains its defining elements, summarised in the box below.

[1] The lead author (Philip Woods) began to explore the concept of democratic sensibility in 2024 as a way of giving a clearer and more coherent focus to the change that the AECED pedagogy of aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy was intended to foster. This gave rise to a proposal in 2025 to write a position paper on democratic sensibility.

The defining elements of democratic sensibility comprise:

Interlinking features of

- aesthetic-embodied awareness
- connectedness
- qualities exercised in the practice of democracy

Feel for democracy, comprising

- feeling towards democratic values
- feeling towards dimensions of democracy

Before turning to these, the idea of sensibility is briefly discussed.

Sensibility

The term 'sensibility' has different associations and meanings. The term has been associated, for example, with sentimentality – dramatic emotional expression and stories with a simple, evocative moral - which emerged as an influential discourse in 18th century Britain; but also with more questioning and complex expressive works on heightened responsiveness to sensory experience, such as those of poets of sensibility (e.g. Coleridge, Wordsworth, Blake) (Todd 1986). In the 18th century, sensibility "becomes the name for a deep and untaught capacity to feel emotion, to perceive beauty, and especially to sympathize with others' sufferings" (Brodey 2015: 63). A more socially critical perspective is that of a new sensibility, which in a Marxian frame of reference Marcuse (1969: 20) describes as a transformed sensitivity which, alongside change in socio-economic structures, develops "an instinctual barrier against cruelty, brutality, ugliness" and an instinctive imagination to envisage a world without competitive exploitation, aggression and dominance by the market.

Two foundational propositions about sensibility are introduced here. Firstly, sensibility is defined as the quality of awareness of, and sensitivity and responsiveness to, aesthetic-embodied experience. It is our sensitivity to the sensations that the body experiences and to which we react first and foremost affectively, without language. The ongoing and everyday process of sensibility constitutes the patterns and variations in the texture of a person's feeling over time – which may include a sense of lightness or heaviness or darkness; or vibrancy and immediacy, or a more subtle and quiet mood; or feelings that arise through remembrances of past experience; or a sense of warmth of that arises from that which is felt to be good or the cold of that which feels bad; and so on and so on.

Secondly, sensibility is also a way of or an integral part of knowing. Aesthetic-embodied experiencing has epistemic consequences for how we know the world. Sensibility is about how we learn and how we know ourselves and the world as interconnected, sensory elements of that world. This is a feature of sensibility as understood in Romanticism: “Of genius, in the fine arts, the only infallible sign is the widening the sphere of human sensibility, for the delight, honour, and benefit of human nature” (PW 3:82) (Wordsworth, quoted in Chandler 2018: 771). The epistemic worth of feelings has been given sustained attention in philosophy (Todd 2014, Ferran 2022; see also Jääskeläinen et al 2025) and is discussed later in this paper. It is evident that, whether in academic study or in artistic practice, sensibility also can involve our awareness of knowing through sensibility and feeling, and its foundations in sensory experience – a meta-sensibility.

The paper now turns to a discussion of democratic sensibility.

Democratic sensibility

Democratic sensibility is a particular form of sensibility that has an important influence in nurturing democracy. Indeed, it is a vital factor in democracy. Democratic sensibility refers to a heightened sensibility that involves experiencing a sense of fundamental connectedness with and between the elements of the world, and a sense of fundamental equality of worth of these elements. It involves openness to learning from and with others. More than that, democratic sensibility involves an openness to new possibilities and to reimagining relations, communities and futures.

The concept draws conceptual sustenance from numerous sources. For example, drawing from Marcuse, Freire, Adorno, Foucault and others, Kennedy (2017: 3-4) argues for a democratic sensibility as a feature of "the embodied subject who experiences the empathy and the sense of intrinsic ethical requirement that instinctively refuses hierarchy, domination, and the arrogation of privilege by the powerful few at the expense of the dispossessed many". The idea discussed by Kennedy draws from Marcuse's concept of new sensibility, noted in the previous section. It has similarities also with the concept of "love as an integrative power", which is a sense of connectedness that acts to integrate a group or organisation (discussed further below) (Woods 2019: 167-172), as well as aspects of democratic consciousness – a mindset which embraces free-thinking, collaborative predisposition, love of equality, compassion and democratic values (Woods 2011: 102-104).

Inequalities, conflicts, embedded differences of traditions and identities and boundaries of belonging can lead to division, setting people against each other, and to exploitation. Yet, there is also the potential for people's sensibility to be enhanced and for people to feel themselves to be an interconnected part of the world. Such enhanced sensibility, involving aesthetic-embodied experiencing of connectedness, a sense of equality of worth and openness to mutual learning and new possibilities, constitutes affective roots of democracy[2].

[2] See Woods (2006) for an early discussion (in relation to democratic leadership) of the idea of the affective roots of democracy, which is extended in Woods (2016).

We now outline the defining elements of democratic sensibility.

1 **Aesthetic-embodied awareness, connectedness and qualities exercised in the practice of democracy**

a) Aesthetic-embodied awareness

Aesthetic-embodied awareness involves appreciation of and sensitivity to the aesthetic-embodied dimension of being human and an ability to learn from this in order to act and respond to others more democractically [3]. The importance of areas of experience - such as feelings, ethical and spiritual sensibilities, creative and imaginative capabilities, beauty, joy, suffering and bodily senses - is explained in Jääskeläinen et al (2025). These authors conclude that the more we appreciate and are aware of the aesthetic-embodied dimension, the more we enhance not only how we understand the world and how we experience ourselves and others, but also our ability to connect with ourselves and others in an empathic and ethical way. Aesthetic-embodied awareness is thus of fundamental importance for the practice of democracy, particularly through associated features of connectedness and the exercise of key aesthetic-embodied qualities, which are addressed next in turn.

b) Connectedness

Connectedness concerns our awareness of and felt relatedness with our self, with others and the world of which we are an interconnected part; it encompasses self-orientated awareness and other-orientated awareness and antipathy towards injustices. The idea of love as an integrative power helps in understanding connectedness in groups and organisations. Love as an integrative power conceptualises a predisposition towards agency that is challenging towards unjust inequalities and democratising in its intent, and thus describes a kind of democratic sensibility. Such love “is not simply the feeling of an individual but the fruit of being interconnected and being aware of existing in interrelation with all life and matter” (Woods 2019: 169). The pervading feature of love as an integrative power is connectedness - the “affective and experiential phenomenon of closeness with people, nature and experiences often referred to as spiritual”.

[3] Based on the definition of aesthetic awareness in Woods et al 2023 and Jääskeläinen et al (2025).

Experiences by individuals of connectedness have been found to foster a deep sense of connection or 'relational consciousness' (Hay with Nye 1998) and often come unbidden to the person. These have been the subject of enquiry in psychology and in spiritual studies [4]. Such experience may or may not be felt or experienced as spiritual or religious, but they are felt to carry profound existential and ethical meaning, experienced by the person as a felt connection with the self, others and the world.

c) Aesthetic-embodied qualities

Aesthetic-embodied qualities are here defined as human attributes characteristic of flourishing democracy and democratic relations, and include aesthetic reflexivity (Woods et al 2023). They are not reducible to the accumulation of skills, but are complex kinds of "non-rational, non-logical capabilities" (Sutherland 2012: 26). They include attributes such as humility, respect, empathy, active listening, integrity and compassion, as well as openness to otherness and new possibilities (Docherty 2006). For democracy, Rosa (2024) highlights the need for a listening heart, a concept that places feelings and aesthetic awareness (the heart) central to listening and dialogue in the everyday practice of democracy. The listening heart means being "attentive to what's out there, allow[ing] myself to be invoked and touched by something different, by a different voice that says something that diverges from my agenda and is not what I expected and thus represents an opportunity to engage with someone else…" (Rosa 2024: 43). Aesthetic-embodied qualities are integral to the democratic sensibility that imbues everyday interactions and enables the practice of power-sharing, transforming dialogue, holistic learning and relational well-being.

[4] For other discussions relating to this kind of individual experience, see for example, Cottingham 2005; Donaldson 1992; Hay 1982; Hay and Hunt 2000; Woods, G. 2007; Woods, P. A. 2016; Woods and Woods 2010

2 Feel for democracy

Feel for democracy is the sense that is evoked by the idea of democracy and the constituting elements of democratic practice. There are three aspects highlighted here.

a) Feeling towards democratic values

The first is feeling towards democratic values. These values, emphasised in democracy-as-becoming in the AECED project, are:

- equality and equity
- freedom
- responsiveness [5]

Values can be seen as encompassing both the affective and cognitive: "Values are 'evaluative beliefs that synthesize affective and cognitive elements to orient people to the world in which they live' (Marini 2000, p. 2828)..."[6]. The affective, aesthetic-embodied dimension has an essential role in relation to values, and therefore in democratic sensibility with regard to democratic values.

There is a substantial literature on feelings and values. Todd (2014), for example, explores the field of emotions and values. There is much philosophical work that sees emotions as inherently a type of evaluative belief or value judgement. And there are many who argue that emotions are not simply cognitive but that

> "unlike merely intellectual, propositional evaluative knowledge, emotions uniquely provide (or purport to provide) direct experiential acquaintance with evaluative states of affairs. Their distinctive phenomenal character, bodily feelings, valence, motivational pull, and world-directed intentionality, all serve to reveal the evaluative world; or to put it more neutrally – to reveal, evaluatively, the world." (Todd 2014: 704).

[5] This might also be viewed as openness. Luguetti et al (2024: 309) discuss bel hooks' idea of radical openness: "Radical openness is the ability to 'set aside' our own biases and assumptions during collaborative endeavours, guided by dialogue. More than open-mindedness, radical openness changes the ways in which critical thinkers relate to the world; creating a space open for subversive discussion aimed at freedom". This relates also to the idea of suspension, meaning not rushing to stick with the familiar: McGilchrist (2021: 222) writes of this as a feature of the right hemisphere of the brain which has a longer working memory "so that the phenomenon [being considered by the person] may be held in suspension without collapsing it into something familiar".

[6] quoted in Hitlin and Piliavin (2004: 362).

There is specifically a strand in the field of emotions and values that takes the view that emotions provide a distinct kind of experience showing or creating value and that emotions as a result involve “feeling towards” (op cit: 705) values. In a sociological discussion of values-intuitive rational action, the argument is made that values-intuition has epistemic worth in helping to guide the person to what is of value (Woods 2001). Values-intuition can be a form of knowing that turns attention to that which is of highest importance - beyond simply what is best for me in a narrow, self-interested sense. In this vein, Ferran (2022) argues that value is apprehended through intentional feeling. In such an affective state,

> “we are ‘affected’ such that reality is presented under an ‘evaluative light’ according to which some features are made more salient than others so that we can orient ourselves in action and thought. Affective states involve a relation to values: they present reality not in neutral terms but imbued with evaluative properties” (Ferran 2022: 77).

Ferran draws a fundamental distinction between emotion as focused on the person and what is ‘inside’ and a feeling of value which is responsive to something concerning the object of apprehension. These intentional feelings (i.e. feelings focused on an object of apprehension) are distinct from bodily feelings that are not intentional, and distinct from moods and sentiments (e.g. hate) (p78). For Ferran, a ‘feeling for value’ is a specific mode of the experience of values. They can be known about in other ways (by testimony, applying rules, deduction, etc.); however, “it is only through feeling that we apprehend and experience them” (p78; emphasis added). Ferran highlights different kinds of ‘property’ (i.e. different kinds of valuation) in this felt knowing: “The content of VF [feeling for value] is an evaluative property, but evaluative properties come in different kinds. “Thin” or general evaluative properties (e.g., good, bad) can be specified in different directions, while “thick” or specific evaluative properties (e.g., dangerous, rude, beautiful) are particular ways of being good or bad (p80).

From this brief discussion of the epistemic worth of feeling, we can suggest that democratic sensibility involves apprehension of values of equality/equity, freedom and responsiveness through feeling towards those values. This does not preclude approaching them through other modes – such as judgement through cognitive reasoning.

b) Feeling towards principles of democracy

The second takes the underlying argument in section a) and extends its applicability to the principles (or dimensions) of democracy. The specific focus relates to the principles argued elsewhere to be integral to holistic democracy and democracy-as-becoming (Woods 2024). These principles are propositions that offer a guide for action in the creation of a rich and holistic form of democracy as a process of becoming. Feeling towards these principles involves feelings of warmth, pleasure and positivity towards the idea and practice of power sharing, transforming dialogue, holistic learning and relational well-being.

c) Recognising a political dimension to feeling

We think it important to recognise that feelings towards democracy and its principles are not necessarily warm and uncomplicated. We find Boler's (1999) work helpful in highlighting the political dimensions of reactions to values, including the role of upbringing, education and socialisation. Boler brings critical attention to how emotions are socially constructed and entwined with power, as does the work of others such as (Ahmed 2005). The point that arises from this perspective is that emotions and feelings towards democratic values and principles are not only epistemic, but also political. For example, it can be argued that feeling positively toward power-sharing or relational well-being requires unlearning dominant emotional norms that valorise individual competition or detachment. To understand our own emotions and feelings, sometimes we need to pay attention and open ourselves to others' emotions and feelings – particularly those who have been marginalised.

We therefore need to recognise, with regard to emotions and feelings involved in democratic sensibility, the importance of the following:

- critical affective literacy. This concerns the capacity to examine how our feelings toward justice, equality or dialogue are cultivated, distorted or suppressed by the cultural and institutional environments we inhabit. It involves exercising aesthetic-embodied reflexivity - that is “critical, probing reflection that raises and addresses challenging questions about the patterns, values, beliefs and assumptions in our aesthetic experiences and awareness” (Jääskeläinen et al 2025: 10; see also Woods et al 2023: 603).
- emotions and feelings that are ‘less warm’. Democratic sensibility concerns not just sensing warmth or affirmation; it can also include emotions and feelings such as discomfort, grief, vulnerability and anger, which signal ethical dissonance and the need for transformation.

In summary, nurturing a feel for democracy involves sensory experiences of feeling towards democratic values and towards democratic decision-making, dialogue and relationships, and critical aesthetic-embodied reflexivity concerning how such feelings may be shaped by social contexts and the everyday effects of power imbalances but may also alert us to transformational possibilities. This has some important pedagogical implications. Educators could create reflective spaces where students are encouraged to articulate their emotional responses to issues of justice or inequality. Crucial is to deal with and address the role of uncomfortable emotions – such as shame, anger or vulnerability – as something that helps students discern how such emotions are shaped by cultural and institutional conditions, and how they might be transformed into resources for ethical agency and democratic transformation.

The place of Democratic Sensibility in Education for Democracy

In this section, democratic sensibility is located in the wider context of education for democracy - in particular, in relation to democratic knowledge and democratic skills (Figure 1).

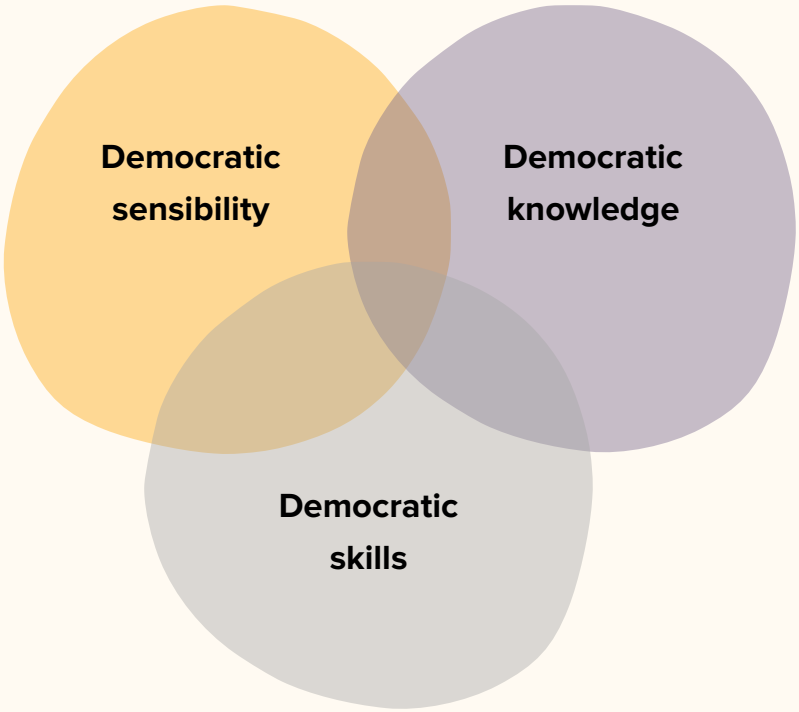

Figure 1: Democratic sensibility in context of key aspects of education for democracy

Education for democracy involves enhancing people's knowledge about democracy and people's abilities, motivation and will to engage in and shape the practice of democracy. We briefly describe each of the aspects of education for democracy in Figure 1.

Democratic knowledge includes knowledge and understanding of matters such as:
a. democracy, its institutions and practices, and the forms these can take at different levels (from international and state levels, down to everyday level)
b. human rights, inequalities and social justice
c. environmental issues and how they relate to democracy

Enhancement of democratic knowledge may include development of knowledge and critical understanding of society, fundamental social processes and differing community traditions and experiences of democracy, as well as learning about frameworks and ideas that enable critical analysis of issues and events.

Democratic skills concerns people's capabilities to initiate, engage with or respond to democratic activity. This includes involvement in democratic activity as voters, candidates for election, supporters or campaigners for change, participants in dialogue and debates, and collaborative engagement with friends, family, colleagues and community - as well as making choices not to participate in democratic activity. Capabilities include those concerned with civic competence (interculturalism, decision-making and action in democracy, co-operation skills, etc.) and social and communication skills (including active listening, paraphrasing, rephrasing, emotion management, handling conflict, etc.) (See for example Council of Europe 2016: 11; OSCE 2013; UN 2005).

Compared with democratic knowledge and democratic skills, democratic sensibility concerns distinct and different aspects of what is needed for democracy to flourish. Figure 2 uses a framework of areas of intelligence (Branson 2023: 166-168) to summarise the distinction between democratic sensibility, democratic knowledge and democratic skills. In the actual practice of democracy and democratic relations, these three aspects are interlinking factors in how people relate to democracy.

	Definition	Associated areas of intelligence (Branson 2023: 166-168)
Democratic sensibility	feel for democracy, awareness of and responsiveness to aesthetic-embodied qualities exercised in practice of democracy	**emotional and intuitive intelligence** – awareness of self and others, ability to sense messages and meaning from sensory experiences, feelings, sensitivities, the complex & unfamiliar
Democratic knowledge	Knowledge and understanding of democracy	**analytical –** rational analysis, knowledge of propositions, theory, ideas rules, etc
Democratic skills	capabilities to act democratically and as a democratic citizen	**practical** – know-how, functional knowledge of how to do things, to make things

Table 1. Democratic sensibility, democratic knowledge and democratic agency

Nurturing Democratic Sensibility and assessing its growth

Understanding more about how democratic sensibility can be nurtured and its growth assessed (e.g. through reflective tools) is an aim of future work. In this section, some brief notes are made on these matters.

We highlight the value of seeing the cultivation of democratic sensibility as a layered and dynamic process. For example, the cultivating of democratic sensibility may be seen as occurring through a mutually reinforcing set of layers: the intrapersonal, interpersonal and contextual.

The intrapersonal dimension emphasises embodied self-awareness, emotional literacy, and the capacity for democratic imagination. This layer reflects the foundational work individuals do within themselves – learning to recognise and respond to their own emotions, sensations, and ethical inclinations. Such inner awareness provides the grounding for relational practices and broader democratic engagement.

The interpersonal dimension is where democratic sensibility unfolds through relationships with others. Rosa relates democratic sensibility to the “collective sphere of resonance”, resonance being the character of dynamic, creative and generative encounters between people important for the public sphere of democratic polity (Rosa 2022: 26). In the interpersonal dimension, connectedness, empathy, humility, and responsiveness come into play. This layer highlights how mutual recognition, dialogue and co-creative processes deepen one’s engagement with democracy. Relational encounters enable individuals to see themselves in others and to practice the values they have begun cultivating internally. In different interpersonal situations, individuals perceive themselves differently, and their engagement varies depending on the distribution of power and the positions of those involved.

Then there is the contextual dimension, which situates democratic sensibility within institutional, systemic and ecological contexts. This includes an affective alignment with democratic values – such as equality/equity, freedom, and responsiveness – and a sense of ecological responsibility that connects the human with the world. Through participation in collective practices and community structures, individuals begin to experience democracy not as abstract governance, but as a tangible, lived process.

In terms of assessing the growth of democratic sensibility, we note three points:

- It is helpful for people and collectivities (organisations, groups, teams, etc) if they can use or adapt exercises or tools that give them an idea of where they are in relation to cultivating democratic sensibility. Use of such exercises and tools can be formative processes that support the cultivation of democratic sensibility.
- Democratic sensibility and its constituent elements are perhaps best seen not as a set of standards to be attained and then ‘ticked off’ as being achieved. The idea of democratic sensibility and its elements provide guidance on a journey of discovery towards heightened sensitivities and awareness important for acting democratically and as a democratic citizenship. Nurturing democratic sensibility on this journey is a contingent creation. That is, it will vary and develop in ways that are expressive of the person, their relations and their context. Democratic sensibility is, in that way, an ongoing co-creation of people and their context.

- We would highlight the value of exercises or tools that emphasise reflective engagement (individual and collaborative) by those who are interested in fostering democratic sensibility. Assessment would need to be sensitive and responsive to differences in context – cultural and institutional (such as democratic ideas, history and practice that characterise the context). Democratic sensibility would be integral to exercising assessment and reflection. That is, assessment and reflection should involve exercising as far as possible in relation to self and others the defining features of democratic sensibility: aesthetic-embodied awareness, a sense of connectedness, qualities exercised in the practice of democracy and feel for democracy involving feeling towards democratic values and towards the principles of democracy.

Implications for policy and practice

Democratic sensibility has potential to support key issues of concern to many policy actors and practitioners, in both the private and public spheres. For example, its cultivation amongst individuals and in groups, supports aims such as enhancing innovation, well-being and more distributed forms of leadership. Awareness and cultivation of democratic sensibility can be a valuable part of developing institutional culture, organisational design (such as institutional rituals and configurations of space), community relationships, leadership development and professional learning. The authors intend to continue exploring implications for policy and practice in future work.

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