# Guide for aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy

## IN THE FIELD OF ADULT, PROFESSIONAL AND ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

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**Accessibility and use with read-aloud tools**
This document is designed to support use with read-aloud tools and assistive technologies. The text is organised in a clear, numbered structure and presented in a logical reading order to support audio reading. Images and diagrams include alternative text where they carry meaning.

For enhanced navigation, an accessible Word version is also available on request.

All diagrams and tables in this document are accompanied by short explanatory text to ensure accessibility for readers using screen readers or read-aloud tools.

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# Acknowledgements

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# 1. Introduction

In response to the challenges to and for democracy facing European societies today, this Guide encourages and supports aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD) in adult, professional, and organisational learning settings (APOL). It is intended for educators, facilitators, supervisors, trainers, professional learning designers, leaders and others who work with adults in formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts. With this guide, we aim to support facilitators, change-makers and consultants who seek to foster democratic habits, values and sensibilities within educational institutions or who work within organisational and networked settings to support democratic change and transformation. Across these contexts, participatory and body-based approaches can make a significant difference to individual, collective, and group, network, and organisational learning.

The AECED project was created to respond to democratic tensions by opening doors to intense, participatory, playful, and resourceful forms of learning — for ourselves and for the individuals, groups, and organisations we work with. Democracy is understood here not only as a political system, but as an ongoing transformation of cultures of learning and working together in everyday practice – mirrored also in our educational cultures and practices. In this sense, our Guide is grounded in the understanding that democracy is not only, or primarily, learned through discussion, policy, or procedures, but is lived and felt through everyday educational and professional relations. Through our aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy approach, we invite adults to explore democracy differently: cultivating democratic sensibility through movement, bodily awareness, and creative expression; sharing, reflecting on, and learning from feelings; and engaging aesthetic and bodily senses and aspiring to shared meaning-making.

**Suggesting a flexible and playful style of reading...**

You can use this Guide in multiple ways, depending on your context and purpose:

- as a tool of reference for you as an educator, facilitator, change-maker or consultant - exploring learning for democracy
- as a reflective companion for individuals designing, organising and facilitating adult and professional learning and organisational change
- as a basis for dialogue within your own or your facilitated professional learning communities, networks and organisations

You are invited and encouraged to engage selectively with the Guide, revisiting sections over time and in response to your lived experience. We offer it as a reflective tool, one that we hope will deepen your understanding, reflexivity, and engagement with AELD methods through practice and through your responsive interactions within diverse learning groups.

**Pause for reflection**
Having had a look at the contents page, where do you think you might start your AELD journey? Which sections are most relevant for you and your context at the moment?

As mentioned above, this Guide aligns with "Connecting with democracy: A pedagogical framework for education for democracy", which understands democracy as a living, unfinished process – a way of continuous democratic becoming through pedagogical responsiveness, relational awareness, and exploratory and reflective practice. Together with the Practice Companion, these three complementary resources aim to support you individually or collectively and to drive attentional shifts in educational and other organisational settings through AELD. We see this guide as part of a wider ecology of resources for learning, practising, and sustaining education for democracy.

In the Guide and Practice Companion, we offer practical resources, examples, methods and illustrative activities. These materials are creative invitations to be adapted, combined or set aside according to your context, experience and judgement. Many of the examples, methods, and illustrative examples come directly from our AECED research, where we trialled approaches, methods, and activities across different APOL settings and partner countries. They reflect eight of the 19 cases in the AECED Participatory Action Research (PAR) trials.

[1] You can read more about the individual cases in deliverable 4.4: Data analysis reports, and about cross-case analysis in deliverable 4.5: Transnational conclusions on this website: www.aeced.org

**Why this Guide and AELD matter**

At the heart of this Guide are conceptual reflections on how democratic sensibility can be cultivated in APOL settings. As many of us have had little encouragement to work with the senses or to integrate the body explicitly into our pedagogical and organisational education interventions, this work requires careful building of trust, openness, and safe spaces – for ourselves and for others.

We wish to support your capacity to perceive, care, listen, and act with others in more democratic ways. Research from the AECED project shows that, in APOL learning, such sensibility develops gradually, through relational, embodied and reflective practices that are responsive to context, power, difference and vulnerability.

Our Guide does not assume that learning will lead directly to organisational or institutional change. While changes in practice, relationships or organisational cultures may emerge over time, these are understood as possible and contingent outcomes, not as predefined goals.

**Key points:**

Within this Guide, APOL is approached as:
- ethical and relational practice rather than skills training
- experiential and embodied rather than purely cognitive
- situated and contextual rather than transferable as a fixed model
- open-ended rather than outcome-driven

## 2. How can AELD support the learning of adults, professionals and organisations?

> **Trust as a foundation for learning**
>
> Reflecting on the collective development of a movement score, one participant reflected: "And then I realised that so much of the process for me was about finding trust, and then I also noticed how the group opened up and how we didn't just do some dance things, but also talked a lot and then also noticed that the group also told personal stories. And I thought that somehow, well, that definitely did something to me, and I thought, okay, this is a very trusting group and it's actually a place where you can explore yourself."
>
> AECED case 10: Germany - Higher education & adult, professional and organisational learning

APOL takes place in diverse contexts, marked by experience, expertise, responsibility and power. These contexts can include a range of workplace settings, such as educational institutions, within specific professional learning communities or professional networks, engaging online or in person, and offering formal and informal learning opportunities. These learners are often present by choice and with personal and professional aims; they enter educational settings with practical experience shaped by their contexts, vocational fields and roles, and professional and organisational habits. If they are members of organisations, they may participate voluntarily or not.

In APOL contexts, democratic learning is typically non-linear and gradual. Participants often describe moments of uncertainty, discomfort or resistance alongside curiosity, connection and insight. These experiences are understood as part of democratic becoming rather than as failures of learning. For this reason, facilitation in AELD requires attentiveness to pacing, consent, boundaries and care – considerations that can be made transparent for learners in APOL.

APOL is often directed to deepen professional identities and develop applicable skills; in contrast, the AECED project is less concerned with the "what" of learning and more with the "how": Learning sites become spaces within which learning for democracy can be fostered when attention is given to the embodied nature of learning and the application of a variety of aesthetic and embodied methods.

Engaging with AELD as professionals and in institutional realities, we shift our awareness to notice, experience and reflect on how democracy is already lived – or constrained – in everyday professional and organisational relations (see "Connecting with democracy: A pedagogical framework for education for democracy" pp. 11-26).

As the following figure shows, these qualities relate to individuals and their involvement in situations as embodied actors. Expanding these qualities to learning environments, they translate into a process-based understanding of AELD. There is no beginning or end in this cycle; you can choose an entry point that suits your educational practice.

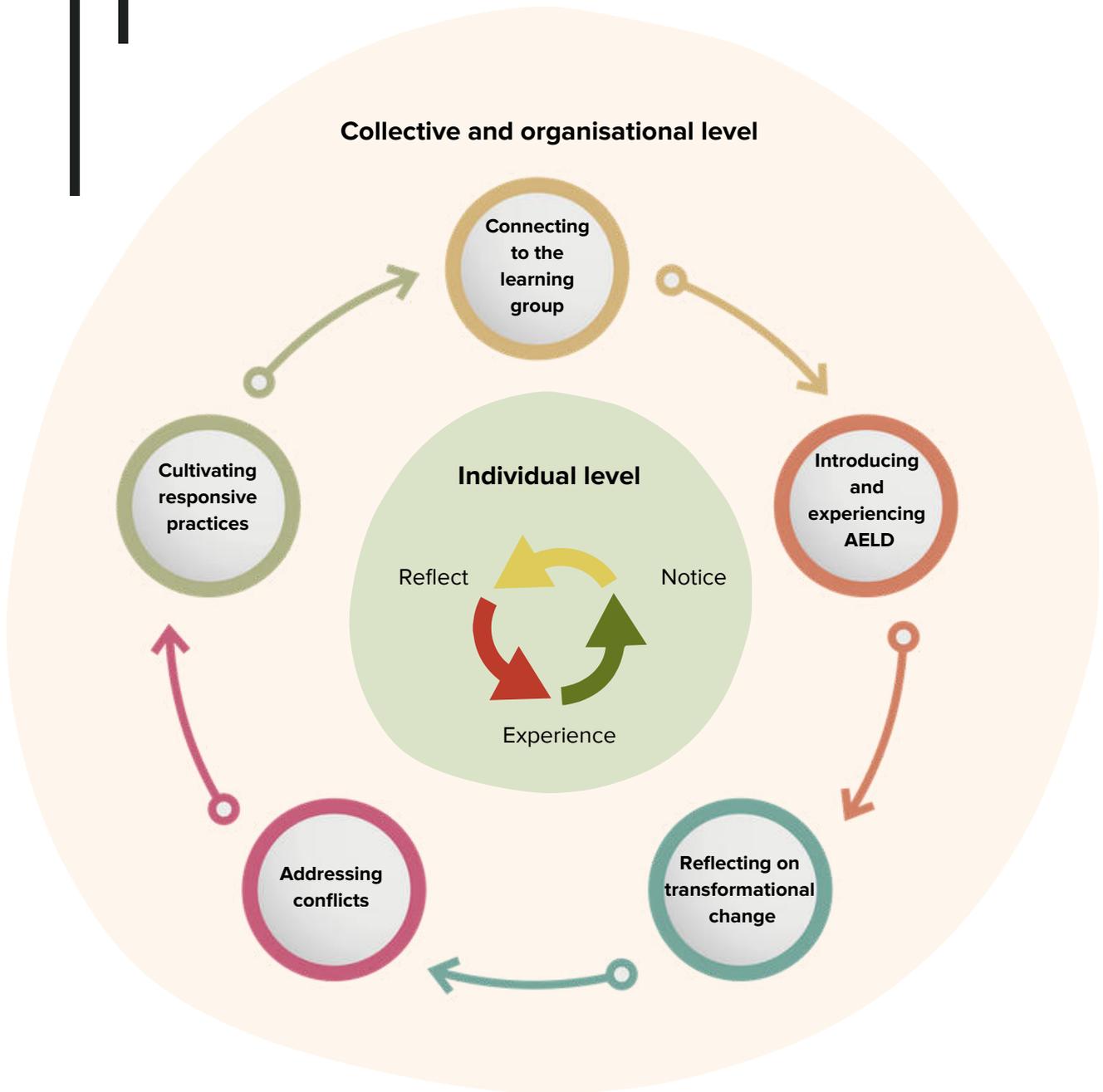**Figure 1: The cycles of learning on an individual, collective and organisational level.**

**Key points:**

AELD brings often-overlooked dimensions of democratic life into action by engaging participants' emotions, imaginations, sensations, and experiences.

Importantly, this does not mean that implementing AELD changes what you do; rather, it transforms how learning environments support democracy as lived practice.

## Why aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods in APOL contexts?

As outlined in "Connecting with Democracy: A Pedagogical Framework for Education for Democracy", aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods can enable, activate and operationalise AELD characteristics. They allow us to open up to the affective and creative sides of ourselves, of others and the environment we live, work and learn in, and help bring to the fore an appreciation of the aesthetic and a recognition of the intrinsic role of the body in thinking, feeling, experiencing and being.

There is a great variety of aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods that can be used or combined in APOL settings. Some examples of methods used within the eight APOL trials include: collage-creation; photo and object elicitation; body movement; drama sketch; pattern language of commoning (PLC); narrative activity (e.g., storytelling, poetry); modelling; crafting and drawing. The example below gives a flavour of the aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods that were used in UK Case 18, which focused on professional learning for doctoral supervisors.

**Engaging a plurality of AELD in doctoral supervisor development**

Within the case's facilitated sessions, we wanted to draw on a range of aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods to support reflection and learning for democracy. Some methods focused on concepts central to AECED, while others explicitly addressed democratic supervisory practices.

Initial methods included a visualisation exercise from the AECED resources to provide a gentle start and a taster of what was to come. A gesture response activity provided something a little different – participants were invited to express, through movement/gesture/bodily response, how they connected with the aims of the wider AECED project and what reactions/feelings those aims evoked. This was a new experience for most. Some embraced it, some found it a little awkward; nonetheless, the activity prompted discussion and self-reflection. A found image / drawing activity in response to a stimulus video about democracy-as-becoming invited an aesthetic experience in which the drawing or creation process itself opened a space for reflection and the subjective emergence of an understanding.

Central to the Case 18 facilitated sessions was the participants' collaborative planning for, and then trialling of, an aesthetic and/or embodied method. Through collaborative reflection and discussion, the groups identified areas to explore in relation to doctoral supervision – power, voice, care, identity – and chose creative methods to work with that included collage self-portrait, found objects, knitting, model making, poetry, and comic strip creation. Flexibility was key for engagement; it provided choice, including the choice not to participate, or to participate differently.

A collage activity provided a final opportunity for discussion and collective reflection. Supervisors spoke about what they'd learnt about supervision, but also about other things, such as the meaning of democracy, and the challenge of its enactment in contemporary higher education.

Across all sessions, supervisors felt able to reflect on their experience of democracy within the sessions themselves; for example, the value of aesthetic and embodied methods in stimulating dialogue, of actively listening to others as they shared their creative outputs, being open to others' points of view and to seeing things from different perspectives. Overall, the supervisors appreciated the time to engage in collective reflection, and to explore the use of different aesthetic and embodies pedagogical methods in a supportive environment.[2].

[2] You can read more about this case, Case 18, in the project deliverable WP4.4 Country Case Report. This case research was approved by the University of Hertfordshire Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority: protocol numbers: SLE/SF/UH/06090; aSLE/SF/UH/06090(1); 02642024 Oct SSAH.

You might be a practitioner who has already used similar creative methods in your own practice, alternatively these approaches might be new for you. Here, we are inviting you to think about how aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods can be used intentionally, as part of an array of other educational practices, to foster AELD.

**Pause for reflection**
What aesthetic and embodied methods have you experienced – as a learner, as a teacher, as a supervisor, a researcher, and/or outside of your professional role?
How were they used?
How did they make you feel?
What did you learn?

While this section has focussed on aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods, within AELD, these methods are there to support learning for democracy. The next section will explore the democratic values and principles that underpin AELD and how they might be experienced in APOL contexts.

# 3. Organisations as spaces for facilitation and collective learning

APOL takes place across a wide range of institutional contexts: schools, universities, local governments, charities, further education organisations, and artistic and social foundations – each offers different working conditions. Some conditions we experienced when conducting our case studies were rather constraining for AELD, as the example below shows:

**Experiencing hierarchical workplaces**

During one session with MA students who come together from different professional backgrounds, we used the hallway to explore our experiences of undemocratic moments in our work lives. Our MA students loved leaving the classroom and breaking out into the hallway. Standing in small groups, they shared their experiences of undemocratic work environments. In fact, they often experienced hierarchies and felt less taken into account because they were younger or seemed less experienced. Feeling that they were on an unequal footing and not being taken seriously seemed to be quite a common experience in the group. To share their experiences of democracy and its limitations in their workplaces, we used the Pattern Language of Commoning (PLC) [3], with the pattern cards displayed on the floor. The MA students moved around and searched for the solutionary pattern that felt most meaningful in relation to the problems they faced in their work settings. They discovered different patterns of solutionary practice and positioned themselves with the pattern that felt most relevant to their specific challenging situation. In this way, many of them met others who had chosen the same solutionary pattern. They exchanged experiences, reflected on the pattern, and related to one another while standing in the hallway. They connected the topic to their lives by using a whole-space, whole-body, whole-problem, and whole-solution approach with the PLC [4].

AECED case 7: Germany - Higher education & adult, professional and organisational learning

[3] The Pattern Language of Commoning (PLC) will be explained in the Practice Companion.
[4] The method of using the Pattern Language of Commoning for widening the space for democracy in your workplace settings will be explained in depth in our practice companion. PLC was used in the AECED project, intertwined with AELD.

Obviously, depending on your working context, constraints may arise from societal power relations, policy, assessment, workload or organisational culture. AELD cannot, by itself, eliminate these constraints. Instead, from a perspective of conditioned work, it is possible to respond thoughtfully within and around them through AELD.

Our practice of AELD is quite conditioned by our environment and experience. Institutional rhythms and curriculum-oriented structures often restrict AELD:

> In our case trialling phase, there were many moments when we observed a tension between the aim to connect to the participants' workplace experiences and the potential AELD activities to address those and the tightly scheduled, institutionalised conditions that framed our encounters.
>
> AECED case 7: Germany - Higher Education & adult, professional and organisational learning

How can we, as facilitators, address these conditions in our professional practice? We might …

- develop a clear understanding of the contexts and their constraints
- explore what might be possible within a given context
- cultivate hopeful yet realistic expectations about scope and scale
- recognise facilitation, as well as reflection and (self-)care, as legitimate work
- stay hopeful, even when conditions are limiting or frustrating!

Even small shifts in how learning is designed or facilitated can support democratic becoming.

**"Meeting in the middle": democratising participation**

In another German case, we aimed to co-create AELD methods based on the Pattern Language of Commoning (PLC). Students, who were all used to hierarchies, even in their workplaces, liked the shared decision-making power, which contrasted with their usual experience of limited co-creation within seminars. In this case, MA students in higher education noted that the circular seating arrangement in the classroom felt special and meaningful to them. One student reflected: "We were easily able to meet in the middle and then discuss the topics."

AECED case 7: Germany - Higher Education & adult, professional and organisational learning

Analysing the relational patterns of how students appropriated the classroom space revealed that the classroom was experienced as a democratising collective process. The rearrangement of the classroom supported the students' sense of being able to speak more freely and bring themselves in, showing that even small changes can change the atmosphere. For the creation of, and whilst in a democratic space, we encourage others to experiment, to trust one another, and to engage collectively.

## Intervening in institutional "grammars"?

One participant in the Latvian case spoke of the norms of their profession, and how change can be difficult:

> "Let's be honest. Since our profession is sometimes quite authoritative, it is essential to look at things from different perspectives. Changing roles was very helpful in this sense. Democratic changes often happen slowly, as we are so accustomed to certain standards that we may struggle to step outside our usual roles."
>
> AECED case 12: Latvia - Secondary Education & adult, professional and organisational learning

Many facilitators – as well as researchers – observe the challenge of organisational and institutional continuity and the persistence of dysfunctional patterns and "grammars"; Tyack & Tobin (1994) problematised this, seeing the "grammar of schooling" as "hard to change".

Educational philosopher John Dewey described that "the manner in which the machinery of instruction bears upon the child … really controls the whole system" (see Tyack & Tobin 1994: 456). These institutional contexts are not just a formal surrounding, but a cultural embedding of our work as educators. Some practices will be more normalised than others. This could either support or limit the use of AELD. The "hidden curricula" of lived institutional practices is exactly this: what a person immediately learns when joining a firm, institution, or educational setting. So, we should not forget what might hinder as well as what might enable the aims we are working towards.

Clearly, education for democracy is not just about methods and approaches; it also involves our attentional structures and our awareness as facilitators and learning partners. With this in mind, we can develop methods that contribute to organisational change in our educational institutions as cultural change, and that enable spaces for education for democracy.

**Pause for reflection**
How could AELD intervene in the rationality and normality of 'grammars of schooling', grammars of higher education, grammars of hierarchical organisations?
Think of one situation you would like to change. What would you like to change? Imagine one aspect you can start with.

## Transforming self–world relations

Addressing the nexus between individual and collective learning, organisational learning and onto-epistemic transformation calls for methodical approaches to organisational change and self–world relational shifts. Educational philosophers Collet-Sabé and Ball (Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2022; Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2023, 2024) argue that this requires an alternative episteme of education that closely connects to education for democracy.

Rather than treating knowledge, learning, and democracy as separate or purely cognitive domains, they invite us to rethink how these are understood, lived, and shared in everyday educational and organisational practices.

From this perspective, transforming self-world relations becomes central. Collet-Sabé and Ball (2024) describe the need for an episteme that privileges interdependency, care, and cooperation, moving beyond the forms of individualism, competition, and consumption that schools, states, and markets often instil (p. 447).

This epistemic shift in learning supports self-formation through commoning. It suggests a relational ontology that forms subjects through care of self, others, communities, and the planet (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2023).

They argue for creating a learning space that is co-creative, dynamic and responsive and which aligns with our intentions to create transformational educational practices.

Establishing a different episteme, however, needs a careful analysis of practices and inventive approaches to cultivate different ways of learning. AELD is one way to 'begin with the body', to take seriously the idea that all learning starts with learners who feel, perceive, and act as embodied actors.

## Staying with the trouble: toward "a new grammar of living" (and organising)

Coined by feminist researcher and scientific activist Donna Haraway, 'staying with the trouble' is an invitation to continuously engage in relational ways of living with all inhabitants of a damaged planet – she asks us to be kin with each other through imaginative and courageous ways of relating. Based on this notion, we believe that APOL is a site where learners not only encounter learning content but also expand their horizons for perceiving and acting while assuming responsible roles as decision makers, developers, consultants, pedagogues, social workers, etc. This multitude of professional involvements can be enriched by grounding our learning sites in AELD.

Following Collet-Sabé and Ball in their imagination of "a new grammar of living", education and politics are perceived as intertwined "processes of co-learning, decision taking, limit testing, and conflict resolution in real contexts in relation to actual problems portending an uncertain future and our extinction" (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2024, p. 447). Education, wherever it happens, is the place where democracy is continually made and remade, shaped by uncertainty, mutual dependence, and ecological crisis.

**Key points:**

In our AECED project, some partners sought to operationalise this "new grammar of living" by creating pedagogical conditions in which participants engage in co-learning, negotiate differences, and collectively respond to shared challenges through AELD. Through such approaches, we seek to support a transformation towards democratic forms of knowing, grounded in care, relationality, and embodied participation.

## Organisations as spaces of transformation?

With the notion of grammar in mind, one thing that became clear from our PAR approach was that institutions and organisations were contexts for AELD. Many of our case trials were influenced and constrained by the conditioned space, time, hierarchies, predefined curricula, textbook-centeredness, frontal spatial classroom designs, and so on.

Even if facilitators may not have an explicit mandate for organisational transformation in the same way as counsellors, organisational consultants, or change-makers, pedagogical work can be transformative – not only at the levels of individual and collective learning, but also at the level of organisational learning that supports the cultivation of democratic practices. Micrological perspectives on social – and organisational – change argue for change as a shift in social practice. In this sense, in line with John Dewey's work, AELD can be understood as relating to the experience of democracy-as-becoming: as societal, organisational, and even political practice.

From this perspective, AELD connects experiencing democracy with democratic engagement and citizenship. Establishing responsive and relational practices through AELD addresses participants and organisations as learning partners and invites them to move beyond their immediate self-understanding: from challenging social injustices, navigating conflict, and seeking mutual understanding, to encouraging local–global connections in our shared planetary situation (Weber & Wieners 2023; Weber, Spahn & Heidelmann 2024).

Informed by our PAR approach (Kemmis et al., 2014; MacDonald, 2012), we see that challenges in education for democracy enable us to create solutions and reflect on experiences together. Deepening democracy as a lived experience is explicitly linked to three layers in our methodological framework (Spahn & Weber, forthcoming) that aim to track transformational change in educational settings through AELD:

- individual and collective learning
- organisational learning
- onto-epistemological transformation

This Guide focuses on all three levels:

- individual and collective learning as subjectively experienced transformation
- organisational learning as a process involving very different actors, including colleagues, consultants, cooperation partners, etc. and their shared practices
- onto-epistemological transformations as a critical inquiry into how our knowledge and habits (re-)produce our ways of perceiving social situations and vice versa.

Based on our research, we see the need to take a deeper dive into our cultural embeddings, the normalities, the unquestioned norms and values we practise every day – on all three levels. For APOL, we will highlight a number of values and principles we developed from our case studies.

# 4. Democratic values and principles in adult, professional and organisational learning

## Democratic values in education

In AELD, democratic values provide the ethical orientation for learning. They express what matters and what gives direction to democratic practice, without prescribing how learning should unfold.

The three democratic values described in the Framework (see Connecting with Democracy: A Pedagogical Framework for Education for Democracy pp. 17–19) are also central to this Guide. These values can be met in the context of adult, professional and organisational learning in the following ways:

- **Freedom** – understood not as unlimited choice, but as the possibility to express oneself, to withhold participation, to explore uncertainty, and to act without fear of coercion or judgement.

Participating students in the development of a dance performance within one of our cases, spoke highly of the community that emerged and the possibility of expressing themselves. Looking back on the course, one participant pointed out the importance of a co-learning atmosphere as a foundation for the willingness to follow aesthetic tasks or impulses."So I think it can create a completely different view again. (.) In my case, for example, I would have taken a different rational approach (...). I generally believe that this physical aspect can, or does, create more in people. And (...) I think it also creates more openness if you approach it through the body and allow it."

[5] https://youtu.be/xb_061_ctrs?si=jOMqtGzaGnOOi0VA

AECED case 10: Germany - Higher Education & adult, professional and organisational learning

- **Equality and equity** – understood as the recognition of equal worth among participants, alongside attentiveness to difference, power asymmetries, access, and the uneven conditions under which adults participate in learning.

The researcher-facilitator in a case with higher education teachers noticed that there needed to be a lot of focus on the invisible norms within groups and what it means to establish more democratic forms of participation, the researcher-facilitator reflected: After facilitating a workshop day, I left wondering how the group makes a silent decision concerning how much talk we tolerate and how far one can meander from the subject. That decision seems to be made through bodily gestures and postures, eliciting affective responses and, for me, a sense of pressure to control the situation. This raises the question in me: Did we really give space to different ways of participating?

AECED case 6: Finland - Higher Education & adult, professional and organisational learning

- **Responsiveness** – understood as attentiveness to others, to context, and to what emerges in the learning process, rather than adherence to fixed plans or predetermined outcomes.

In one early online session, vocational teachers were invited to return to the images they had chosen to represent their learning environments and to look at them again – more slowly, with attention to what usually remains unnoticed. As they shared their observations, small details began to surface: a student's hand resting on a bench, a tilted chair, the soft light from a high window. These elements, previously overlooked, opened a different kind of conversation. Rather than analysing problems, the group shifted into a mode of collective reflection, sensing affective and relational dynamics embedded in their everyday settings. This gentle reorientation of attention – an acceptive gaze – allowed teachers to perceive their contexts with greater openness, revealing patterns of interaction and organisational tensions that typically remain invisible. Through this shared attentional shift, aesthetic and embodied methods became tools for cultivating a more responsive, democratic awareness.

AECED case 16&17: Portugal  - Adult, professional and organisational learning

In adult and professional learning contexts, these values are often experienced implicitly through everyday practices: whose voices are prioritised, how expertise is recognised, how time is allocated, and how disagreement or vulnerability is handled. AELD makes these value dimensions experiential by inviting participants to notice how freedom, equity, equality and responsiveness are felt and enacted in learning situations.

**Pause for reflection**
How do you attend to these democratic values in your everyday practice?
How might AELD support experiencing and feeling these values?

# Democratic principles in adult, professional and organisational learning

While values such as those above express ethical commitments, democratic principles describe how democracy-as-becoming is practised in learning. In our AELD Framework, we have explained in depth the four principles that guided our pedagogical decision-making across contexts. These are shown in the diagram below.
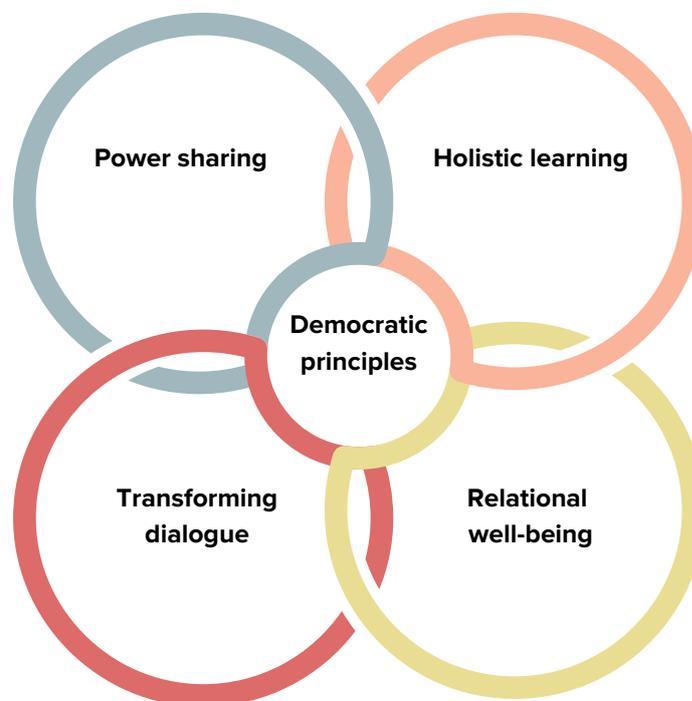


## Power sharing

In APOL, power is never absent. It is shaped by roles, expertise, institutional positions and facilitation responsibilities. Especially in AELD settings, we need to be aware of informal social and group dynamics that set norms and signal what forms of participation are encouraged or discouraged. As facilitators, we need to be self-reflective and very aware of our own power to influence, voice, and make decisions. We may want to invite participants to shape questions, processes or rhythms of learning, while maintaining clear ethical and facilitative boundaries.

Power sharing can involve the following:

- providing activities in which responsibility is distributed among learners (including educators)
- creating opportunities to take initiative and lead, or co-lead, processes related to study and social life
- creating a culture in which all (learners and educators) feel valued, value each other and recognise their contribution to the process of co-learning and co-working
- creating a culture in which everyone has a voice and gives voice to others in the educational context to enable socially-just processes and outcomes in decision-making
- balancing autonomy with group settings, where physical, emotional and cognitive autonomy for independent learning and problem-solving are alternated with collaborative and creative projects or activities with others

**Transforming dialogue**

Especially with AELD, we, as facilitators, are asked to support dialogue rather than discussion or debate. In this sense, we support listening with openness, attending to affect and embodiment, and allowing perspectives to shift through encounter. In adult, professional and organisational learning, transforming dialogue may surface tension, disagreement or discomfort. These moments are approached as opportunities for learning about democracy rather than as problems to be quickly resolved.

Transforming dialogue can involve:

- creating a culture that encourages openness to rethinking one's own beliefs, feelings and embodied experiences
- creating a culture of open and free communication in which topical issues and points of view can be shared without fear of judgement
- creating a culture that encourages listening to diverse points of view, discussing them, and striving for mutual understanding and respect.
- creating a culture that encourages being ready to receive the message and open to others' points of view

**Holistic learning**

Engaging the whole person means attending to professional identities, emotions, bodily responses, and personal histories, which are always present in learning spaces. By a holistic learning approach, we develop a deeper understanding of the history and the potential futures of individuals, collectives and organisations. We may relate to the collective imaginaries and their alternatives. We may connect to multiple forms of expression – visual, narrative, embodied, spatial – alongside reflection and conceptualisation, supporting diverse ways of making meaning.

Holistic learning can involve:
- engaging learners in experiential learning practices where they learn by doing, creating, and problem-solving, and developing critical thinking through hands-on experiences and reflection, to enable them to connect the knowledge they acquire to real-world situations
- activating not only learners' cognitive capabilities but also their emotional, aesthetic, spiritual and embodied capabilities for more effective and comprehensive learning and to help learners develop better engagement with peers, greater confidence and a stronger sense of responsibility for their actions
- using different types of content and aesthetic and embodied learning methods, such as collage-creation, drama, photography, drawing, etc

**Relational well-being**

Especially in the context of adult, professional and organisational learning, relational well-being is often neglected. When we address the senses, we open the space for our feelings and the quality of our relationships. Education for democracy becomes possible when creating safe spaces, when inviting vulnerability, even if it feels risky. Developing attention to trust, care, pacing, and consent is essential in your facilitation. Relational well-being is not a preparatory step but an ongoing responsibility of your facilitation. It is important to stay aware of how our learning unfolds.

Relational well-being can include:
- establishing educational settings that enhance feelings of belonging and mutual acceptance
- organising events that empower connectedness to local communities, nature and the world
- carrying out projects with the active engagement of learners and others as appropriate to the context (such as administrators, educational leaders, community, family and policy actors) to promote a sense of community and well-being
- providing space and activities where learners are welcome to think independently for themselves to make their own judgements, even if they differ from those of others

The following example shows how AELD can develop empathy.

Secondary teachers, in groups of three, were asked to perform a short drama sketch. In the first round, they used words appropriate to the assigned task and context. In the second round, they swapped roles, this time adding emotions to their trilogue. In the third round, they changed roles once more, now also incorporating embodiment into their performance. Reflecting on the activity, one teacher emphasised its role in fostering empathy – learning to see and feel from different perspectives. In discussions following the activity, the teachers reflected on how important this was, and how embodied activities can narrow social distance, foster more democratic relationships, and even challenge traditional roles.

AECED case 12: Latvia -- Secondary Education and Adult, professional and organisational learning

## Values and principles in practice

In your APOL settings, democratic values and principles may not be fully enacted. We rather expect them to be negotiated moment by moment, within constraints of time, institutional culture and participant expectations. We do not expect that AELD will resolve these tensions automatically; holding them collectively and reflectively will allow us all to experience democracy as a lived and relational process.

The following five sections build on the understanding developed so far. They explore how democratic sensibility and responsive pedagogy support the ethical and practical enactment of these values and principles in adult and professional learning contexts.

**Democratic sensibility and enacting democracy in adult, professional and organisational learning**

Democratic sensibility refers to the felt, embodied and relational capacity to engage with others in ways that support democratic life. In the AECED Framework and the AECED Concept Paper (click here to read), we describe it not as a competence to be mastered, but as an orientation that develops over time through experience, reflection and interaction.

When you want to achieve democratic sensibility and enact cultural democracy in APOL, there must be an awareness of:

- how you – and others – may feel and experience power and how you and others exercise it in the interactions of your facilitation and learning process
- how your body and the bodies of your learning partners respond to moments of inclusion, exclusion, recognition, silence or silencing
- how your own emotions – and those of others - such as discomfort, hesitation, curiosity or resistance, signal democratic tensions
- how are relationships in your learning partnerships enable or constrain participating and voicing

We invite you to understand learning processes as characterised through uncertainty and not-knowing, vulnerability and affect. On that basis, AELD can offer a multitude of entry points into participatory, diverse and differentiated learning cultures.

**Embodying-out of learned helplessness …
and embodying collective leadership**

When we trialled the Pattern Language of Commoning's (PLC) potential for Professional and Organisational learning, we used the method of the "Gordian Knot" [6]. Students reflected on this "Gordian Knot" method, as we all closed our eyes and reached out with both hands to connect to two other hands. Building a human knot with our hands and bodies, we unravelled together by moving, climbing, or crawling, finally unfolding into a line and forming a circle again. After experiencing the process, students reflected on the leadership they took or the way they acted in this trial. Participants were invited to use the PLC to choose a card that reflected their level of engagement in the exercise. Interestingly, participants found that it is not about being passive, waiting for others to act, or delegating power to others – even though this is what we are used to and is by far the least challenging way of acting. They reflected on whether responsibility should only be taken by "official leaders" – in this case, to organise the unravelling – who may have an official function, or whether collective leadership is possible within a given situation. This was a moment of transformative learning and empowerment for our Master's students.

[6] It is told that the Phrygian king Gordios tied an intricate knot that many attempted to untie but failed, while Alexander the Great, with one stroke of his sword, tore the knotted strands apart …

Rather than seeking agreement or harmony, democratic sensibility and the enactment of democracy support the capacity to stay with difference, to listen across positions, and to recognise the equal worth of others even in moments of disagreement. This includes becoming aware of one's own assumptions, privileges and limits, as well as the conditions under which others can participate.

Our research from the AECED project and the situation described above shows that democratic awareness may emerge gradually and non-linearly. In moments of confusion and resistance, our participants, as learning partners, experienced moments of insight alongside confusion and resistance. We see these experiences not as obstacles to learning, but as integral to democratic becoming. This is why reflection after experimenting with such methods is crucial.

> In a case that focused on AELD in vocational settings, educators described developing a stronger democratic sensibility, particularly in recognising learners' voices and experiences. At the same time, they identified tensions between democratic aspirations and rigid institutional frameworks. The Guide supported educators in legitimising small-scale, situated acts of participation – such as shared decision-making in learning activities – rather than relying on idealised or abstract models of institutional democracy.
>
> AECED case 16&17: Portugal - Adult, professional and organisational learning

When we cultivate democratic practices, it is not about adopting particular political views. Instead, we, as facilitators, support the development of our own and others' ethical and relational capacities. From the angle of lived democracy, we transform how, and how quickly we judge (others), how we collaborate and how we learn across diverse contexts.[7]

**Responsive pedagogies in adult, professional and organisational learning**
We understand responsive pedagogy from an AELD perspective, not primarily as a set of techniques but as a pedagogical stance: how you, as an educator, notice, respond to, and make judgements within your unfolding facilitation and learning situations (see Connecting with Democracy: A Pedagogical Framework for Education for Democracy pp. 21-22). In APOL, your responsiveness is particularly important. As learning contexts are shaped by diverse experiences, positionalities and power, responsivity is core. Your participants, as learning partners, bring different backgrounds in confidence, authority, cultural and family history, organisational settings, and familiarity with aesthetic and embodied practices, and may have different capacities to take risks and explore aesthetic and embodied learning. With our responsive pedagogy, you attend to these differences without fixing learning partners into predetermined categories or expectations.

[7] Democratic sensibility is closely connected to the acceptive gaze (see Connecting with Democracy: A Pedagogical Framework for Education for Democracy pp. 23 – 24).

From our responsive pedagogical stance, we see APOL as:

- attuning to what is emerging in the group, including affective and embodied signals
- judging in a situated way, adjusting pace and form, inviting in response to context
- being ethical and responsible in the way you care, how you deal with consent and how you address and deal with boundaries
- being reflexive and aware of your own power, assumptions and positionings

Rather than following a predetermined plan, taking a responsive stance will foster reciprocity. In your facilitation, you may shift between guiding, holding space, stepping back, or reframing activities, depending on what supports your democratic attitude and way of practising democracy in each moment.

**Pause for reflection**
Reflecting on your usual habits and the patterns that guide your thinking and actions: do you enjoy/are you comfortable in and with situations of uncertainty?
Do you tend to respond easily to your participants' and learning partners´ experiences and needs?

The following example shows the importance of responding to different contexts and not holding assumptions about the repeatability of sessions. Even if the same aesthetic and embodied approaches are used, the learning experiences are rarely the same.

> In one of our cases we focused on developing higher education teachers' ability to facilitate democracy-as-becoming. This is seldom a straightforward process; using aesthetic and embodied methods to express diverse opinions and foster reflection cannot be approached as a simple cause-and-effect exercise. This became evident when one teacher had two iterations of the teaching trials, with the same content and the same embodied facilitation methods, but with very different outcomes due to the differences between groups.
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> AECED case 6: Finland - Adult, professional and organisational learning

Every learning group will respond differently to aesthetic and embodied methods and it is important to stay aware of the process as it unfolds, to listen to needs and atmospheres, and to adapt our facilitation.

In our AELD approach, responsive pedagogy closely aligns with the practice of an acceptive gaze. Too often, we rush into making snap judgements or take sides without fully listening to different perspectives. Responsivity requires that we remain open-minded. Embodied approaches, in particular, involve risk-taking and trust – being seen by others and, potentially, being judged. Cultivating an acceptive gaze is essential for creating an atmosphere of trust. Differences must be recognised as a legitimate practice – especially when moving in the common space. At the same time, maintaining discernment is crucial. This does not mean uncritically accepting everything, nor does it mean allowing power imbalances or dominance by individuals. Rather, it is about recognising the dignity and worth of each person while attending to ethical and relational boundaries.

In our responsive pedagogy approach, we also acknowledge that not all moments are appropriate for embodied or aesthetic exploration. In the many APOL contexts you may work in, facilitating responsively may mean slowing down, offering alternative modes of engagement, or choosing not to proceed with a practice when conditions of trust, consent, or safety are not in place. Exercising such decisions is a democratic practice, too.

Our AECED research showed that facilitators play a significant role in supporting learning for democracy in adult, professional and organisational contexts. As this role is not one of control or neutrality, but of holding the learning space, it means creating conditions for others to participate, reflect and be in dialogue. As a facilitator, you will always remain attentive to power relations and vulnerability.

**Balancing roles and responsibilities in adult, professional and organisational AELD**

In AELD, we understand roles as relational and dynamic, rather than fixed positions. While responsibilities may shift over time, they do not dissolve. As a facilitator, you will be carefully attending to roles, which will help you sustain ethical, democratic, and meaningful learning spaces.

**Educators, facilitators and learning designers**

As you initiate, host or facilitate APOL for democracy, you will hold particular responsibilities. Your role is not to direct learning towards predefined outcomes, nor to withdraw in the name of neutrality. As a facilitator for democracy-as-becoming, you will need to hold the learning space ethically and attentively.

Your key responsibilities based on this may include:
- creating conditions of relational well-being, trust and care
- making ethical judgements about pacing, consent and boundaries
- attending to power relations linked to role, expertise and institutional position
- offering invitations to participate without coercion
- supporting reflection and dialogue that connect experience with democratic meaning

As a facilitator in AELD, you remain accountable for the learning process, even when power is shared. Power sharing involves negotiation, not abdication of responsibility. This may include naming constraints, clarifying decision-making processes, and intervening when dynamics undermine dignity, inclusion or safety.

> In a session with higher education teachers, discussions highlighted that democracy cannot mean that we are all acting from the same position. The teacher (leader) still holds responsibility for the learning situation, even though they can strive to reduce hierarchies and facilitate power-sharing. Creating practices that do not exclude anyone is a continuous balancing act, with care for difference and a responsibility to enable participation.
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> AECED case 6: Finland - Adult, professional and organisational learning

**Participants and co-learning**

Participants in adult learning for democracy bring diverse experiences, motivations and capacities. In AELD, participants are invited to engage as co-learners, contributing to shared meaning-making while retaining agency over their level and mode of participation.

Participant responsibilities may include:
- engaging with others respectfully, recognising difference and equal worth
- attending to their own boundaries and communicating needs or limits
- remaining open to reflection, uncertainty and learning from experience
- contributing to the relational climate of the group

Participation in embodied and aesthetic practices is always voluntary. Choosing not to participate, to observe, or to engage in alternative ways is recognised as a legitimate form of agency.

> In this example, the PAR process meant that educators shifted from being recipients of training to co-researchers shaping learning activities. This redistribution of roles fostered shared responsibility and increased ownership of democratic practice. Participants highlighted the importance of clear guidance in the Guide regarding facilitation roles and ethical responsibility, particularly to sustain engagement in demanding professional contexts.
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> AECED case 16&17: Portugal - Adult, professional and organisational learning

**Shared and negotiated responsibilities**

Some responsibilities in APOL for democracy are collective. These may include:
- agreeing on ways of working together
- attending to how time, voice and attention are distributed
- reflecting together on what supports or constrains democratic learning

Such responsibilities are often revisited over time, as trust develops and contexts change. Negotiating them explicitly can itself become a moment of democratic learning. Participants, as learning partners, reach consensus on which areas to explore and how to explore them.

**Institutional and organisational responsibilities – organisational learning potentials by transforming practices within learning**

Focusing on learning practices includes organisational reform and transformation. Seeing organisations and institutions from below and from within means to shape the conditions of learning – not only for adult learning and professional learning, but to address organisational learning too.

Contextual responsibilities at this level may include:
- legitimising time and space for reflective, relational learning
- recognising facilitation and care work as valuable professional practice
- avoiding instrumentalisation of AELD for performance or compliance purposes

Supportive institutional conditions are essential for education for democracy. Even where learning settings are loosely connected to organisations and institutions, our cases revealed the strong influence of contextual factors, such as time and space, as well as the mental conditioning of students in higher education and professionals in organisational contexts. We will always face the limitations of AELD methods, which can be "islands in the sun": when the broader context remains unchanged, these methods cannot transform the "hidden curriculum" embedded in the rules of institutions such as schools, universities, or workplace settings. Even if you, as a facilitator, together with participants as co-creators, work creatively, albeit within constraints, and are responsive and suspend snap judgements, there remains a need to begin engaging with the democratisation of organisational contexts and the often-quoted hierarchical settings that shape how we live and work.

With an interest in transformative governance, we re-analysed our cases and generated five 'promising patterns' which foster democratic governance practices.[8] They can be understood as a lens through which we can observe, analyse, or reflect on governance practices in groups.

We outline these patterns below:

- **"Facilitating vulnerability through/in aesthetic and embodied practices"** as a critical condition for relational transformation. This pattern highlights that vulnerability is a key characteristic to be considered in transformative governance. Considering vulnerability creates conditions for more democratic encounters and practices by cultivating trust, enlivening openness, and listening to situated expressions.
- **"Cultivating embodied responsiveness"** foregrounds an attentional and perceptual shift. Through attentiveness to bodily responses and sensations, we experienced underlying organisational patterns, affects, and relations becoming perceptible. This can be further established through cultivating an 'acceptive gaze'.
- **"Cultivating collective aesthetic practices"** as a way of reconfiguring organisational culture. This pattern invites collective experimentation, discussion, and the collaborative implementation of AELD, through which new ways of relating and communities of practice may emerge.
- **"Otherness as resourceful not-knowing"** is a pattern that critically engages with the often demanded knowing subject. By paying attention to differences and situated expressions, new insights may emerge. Otherness stands for processes in which uncertainty and newness are embraced and welcomed, even when they challenge prior knowledge or an existing positionality.
- **"Ethics of care-fullness"** refers to an ethical stance grounded in embodied listening to others' ways of doing, feeling, and acting, and holding open space for difference and diversity. This pattern addresses the potential of how we relate to others.

[8] These patterns were developed for an article submitted to the Journal of Awareness Based System Change: "'Lifting the Roof' with Democracy-as-Becoming. The potential of aesthetic and embodied learning for innovating Governance in Educational Institutions. A Pattern Approach", written by Lea Spahn, Susanne Weber, Pauliina Jääskelainen, Karen Mpamhanga, Cláudia Neves, Karine Oganisjana.

Understanding roles and responsibilities in this way supports ethical clarity without imposing fixed identities or outcomes. In the following sections, we explore the conditions that enable AELD practice in APOL contexts.

**Conditions for practising AELD in adult, professional and organisational learning**

Practising AELD in adult, professional and organisational contexts requires particular conditions, rather than specific settings or resources. These conditions are relational, ethical and contextual. They do not guarantee learning for democracy, but they support its possibility.

**Time and pacing**

APOL is often shaped by time pressure and competing responsibilities. With our AELD approach, we believe that long or intensive sessions are not always necessary – what matters most is being attentive to pacing. This includes allowing time for:
- settling into learning spaces
- experiencing activities without rushing to interpretation
- reflection, individually and collectively
- revisiting experiences over time

When you practise responsive pacing, you acknowledge that insight and sensibility may emerge later – sometimes outside the learning session itself. Short, repeated engagements can often be more effective than one-off intensive interventions.

> Time featured prominently in this example. There was always pressure to keep moving on, with the facilitator frequently repeating the refrain, 'I'm conscious of time.' This reflects the busy, time-pressured context of many contemporary workplaces. Participants, however, welcomed the opportunity to practise aesthetic and embodied methods and engage in collaborative reflection. Talking about an experience of trialling their aesthetic and embodied method, which only lasted twenty-minutes, one participant noted: 'I found that I wasn't being that distracted from it at all' and then went on to say: 'I wasn't thinking about emails or any of that, I was only focused on the task at hand. Which rarely happens in life, actually'. While it may appear that engagement in AELD is time-consuming, this example shows that even short periods of time can be valuable.

AECED case 18: UK - Professional Learning in Higher Education

## Trust, care and consent

Because AELD engages bodies, emotions and imagination, it can make participants feel exposed or vulnerable. Trust and care are therefore central. This includes:

- making participation voluntary and negotiable
- offering clear information about activities in advance, where possible
- legitimising observation, withdrawal or alternative forms of engagement
- attending to boundaries, including emotional and physical limits

Consent is ongoing rather than assumed. Both you, as a facilitator, and participants and learning partners should remain attentive to how comfort levels and willingness may change throughout the learning.

> A participant in one session noted that while some people engage with ABE methods like a duck to water, other people don't. What they had appreciated about the sessions was that 'it feels safe', and that it was possible to make mistakes and to 'mess up' without any judgement.

AECED case 18: UK - Professional Learning in Higher Education

**Inclusion and multiple entry points**

Adult, professional and organisational learners bring diverse cultural backgrounds, abilities, professional identities and prior experiences with aesthetic and embodied practices. Inclusive AELD practice offers multiple entry points, such as:

- different modes of expression (visual, narrative, embodied, verbal)
- varying degrees of participation
- opportunities for individual reflection as well as group dialogue

Inclusion is understood not as adapting individuals to a method, but as adapting learning invitations to support equitable participation.

> Here, one aim was to familiarise university teachers with embodied methods through participatory exercises. In one workshop, an initial orientation exercise focused on body awareness was followed by a collective movement exercise. This movement activity was then followed up by a 'movement on paper' activity using coloured crayons, where the crayon was to move freely across the page. The focus was not on representing anything, but on continuing the movement, letting go, and 'accepting what comes with it.'
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> AECED case 6: Finland - Adult, professional and organisational Learning

**Working with discomfort and resistance**

Discomfort, hesitation or resistance are common in adult, professional and organisational education for democracy, particularly when embodied or aesthetic practices are unfamiliar. In AELD, we treat such responses as meaningful signals rather than problems to overcome.

Conditions for practice include:
- naming discomfort as a possible and legitimate experience
- avoiding pressure to disclose or perform
- creating space to reflect on resistance without judgement

Staying with discomfort, when ethically appropriate, can support democratic sensibility by revealing underlying assumptions, power relations or fears.

> Resistance emerged when vocational educators in this example introduced aesthetic and embodied methods into traditionally instrumental vocational settings. Participants valued examples in the Guide that framed discomfort, uncertainty, and partial failure as integral to democracy-as-becoming. Recognising resistance as part of the learning process enabled educators to persist, adapt, and experiment rather than disengage.
>
> AECED case 16&17: Portugal - Adult, professional and organisational learning

**Online and hybrid contexts**
AELD can be practised in online and hybrid environments, though conditions differ from in-person settings. Online contexts may offer:
- greater control over visibility and participation
- opportunities for asynchronous reflection
- alternative forms of embodied awareness (posture, breath, gaze, spatial orientation)

Being attentive to fatigue, privacy and accessibility is particularly important if you are working in digital spaces. Being responsive may here involve shorter activities, clearer structure, or greater use of individual reflection.

**The acceptive gaze in adult, professional and organisational AELD**

The acceptive gaze is a core ethical and pedagogical orientation within our AELD approach.[9] It refers to a way of seeing, receiving, and responding to others that recognises their dignity, vulnerability, and equal worth, while remaining attentive, discerning, and ethically responsible. In adult, professional, and organisational learning, opening yourself to an acceptive gaze supports engaging with embodied and aesthetic practices that may feel unfamiliar or risky, while also maintaining clear boundaries and respect for consent. In adult, professional and organisational learning, it provides the relational and ethical infrastructure that makes such engagement possible without coercion or harm.

**What the acceptive gaze involves**

Practising the acceptive gaze in APOL involves:
- attending carefully to verbal, emotional and embodied expressions
- receiving contributions without immediate judgement or evaluation
- recognising when to invite, pause, redirect or stop an activity
- holding awareness of power relations linked to role, status and context

The acceptive gaze is not passive. It involves active discernment and responsibility. Facilitators and participants remain attentive to how interactions affect individuals and the group, and intervene when dynamics undermine dignity, inclusion or relational well-being.

[9] You can read more about the acceptive gaze in "Developing democratic engagements and transformation in adult, professional and organisational learning: A practice companion for inspiring your facilitation and change-making".

One researcher-facilitator had careful regard to their position and actions during the trials on facilitating democracy in professional learning cases. Their focus was especially on non-verbal cues, which were observed in participants' gestures, postures, and actions, as well as in the researcher-facilitator's bodily responses to them.

AECED case 6: Finland - Adult, professional and organisational learning

**What the acceptive gaze is not**
It is important to clarify that the acceptive gaze does not:
- require accepting all actions, statements or behaviours uncritically
- remove boundaries or ethical limits
- oblige participants to disclose personal experiences
- mean that discomfort or conflict should be avoided at all costs

Instead, the acceptive gaze supports engaging with difference, tension and uncertainty in ways that are contained, respectful and reflective.

**Acceptive gaze, consent and vulnerability**
Because adult, professional and organisational learners may feel exposed when engaging with embodied or aesthetic practices, the acceptive gaze is closely linked to consent and care. Practising the acceptive gaze includes:
- making participation voluntary and negotiable
- legitimising observation, silence or alternative forms of engagement
- noticing signs of withdrawal, resistance or overwhelm
- responding flexibly to changing levels of comfort

Vulnerability is not sought or produced for its own sake. When it arises, it is met with attentiveness and respect, rather than instrumentalised for learning outcomes.

In one case trial, a doctoral supervisor initially expressed anxiety and self-doubt, saying they were 'not creative' and preferred clear instructions over open-ended invitations. Like others, they felt there was an implicit creative standard to meet for their contribution to be valued. When invited into an arts-based inquiry, the supervisor chose knitting – an activity they knew well – allowing them to work within their comfort zone while still engaging with feelings of discomfort. Using pencils as improvised needles, they created a small piece of fabric with knots representing the difficulties they encountered on their supervisory journey. This familiar practice, used in a different context, prompted new reflection: did they have the right tools to supervise, and could those tools be changed, developed, or even set aside?

AECED case 18: UK - Professional Learning in Higher Education

**A collective orientation**

Although you, as a facilitator, hold particular responsibility for modelling and sustaining the acceptive gaze, it is not solely your individual skill. You can contribute to making it a shared orientation within a learning group, shaping how participants listen, respond and care for one another.

In APOL, cultivating a collective acceptive gaze supports democratic sensibility by enabling participants to remain present with difference, disagreement and ambiguity, without collapsing into judgement or withdrawal.

The acceptive gaze thus underpins all aesthetic and embodied practices described in this Guide and its practice companion. It provides the ethical ground on which adults, professionals and organisations can explore democracy as a lived, relational and embodied process.

**AELD as a transformational shift toward common(ing) education**

While the focus of this Guide is AELD within the APOL context, we share in the pages that follow a brief overview of commoning, which was used intertwined with AELD in a number of cases and found to focus thoughts and act as a catalyst to a transformational shift toward more democratic values, principles and behaviours.

In this Guide, we have understood educational institutions as "an established set of relations, roles, practices, behaviours, norms, disciplines, and resources, in many diverse social areas (education, health, religion, etc.) that, according to the Foucauldian model of analysis, has its own truth and forms of knowledge; specific forms of power and government" (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2024, pp. 443–444).

As educational sociologists and philosophers, Collet-Sabé and Ball suggest commoning as a new episteme for education. Bollier and Helfrich (2019: 73 ff.) understand this episteme of commoning as a specific social practice grounded in the needs and local conditions of commoners (those who practice commoning). Commoning requires reflexive peer-governance and also widens our understanding of economic practices. They see democracy as threefold, referring to the three interconnected spheres of:

- social life
- peer governance, and
- provisioning, respectively, the care economy (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019: 98).

In their vision (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019), the design of both living environments and organisations is core; they argue for pluriversal world relations, a mutual interdependence between people and between people and the world that sustains us (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019: 83). Establishing a counter-discourse of care, reciprocity and equality, commoning is also discussed as a fundamentally and systematically transformative approach to society and an enabling form for de-hierarchising, decentralising, and degrowth, while promoting a needs-based orientation.

Especially in the German cases, we worked with the visual and narrative method of the pattern language of commoning and saw that commoning is about sharpening our awareness toward the practices, arrangements and techniques in educational institutions. How can practices aimed at governing individuals be transformed toward more democracy? By focusing on practices and the interplay of agents and social orders, AELD, both in general and especially when combined with commoning materials like the Pattern Language Card Deck, can help us transform the contexts and cultures we work in from within.

As we have understood commoning as a new grammar of living, a set of relational practices through which people collectively produce ways of being, knowing, and acting together, we see that AELD is the way to move toward our individual and collective self-education as well as organisational education and societal learning.

As AELD approaches were directed toward democracy-as-becoming, they indirectly already connect to commoning, which focuses on the everyday practices of co-decision, mutual accountability, and the ongoing negotiation of difference. By foregrounding relationality and collective meaning-making, commoning sustains democracy as a lived practice rather than a procedural ideal. AELD, from this perspective, supports educational institutions in becoming commoning spaces.

**Participant's Voice:**

In a German case, we developed a stage performance over a period of three months. Reflecting on the process, participants said that the sense of community was one of the outstanding characteristics: "And also, we were a group, and everyone somehow worked together. (...) And everyone had a common project and a sense of community, I thought. And then something came out of it, but it was somehow this connection that I noticed, this cohesion of the group. And in the end, it became a piece because everyone worked on it and everyone was there for each other".

AECED case 10: Germany - Higher education and adult, professional and organisational learning

Following this example, commoning is not about "sharing" everything but cultivating an attentional shift that focuses on 'becoming with each other': sensing connectedness and being part of collective decision-taking in open ended processes. Even if not all partners in our project have worked with this approach, it may still offer valuable impulses and inspiration for re-imagining facilitation, training, change-making, and consultancy toward democracy-as-becoming.

# 5. Using this Guide: continuing AELD in adult, professional and organisational learning

This Guide has offered an orientation to adult, professional and organisational education for democracy through AELD. Rather than providing a programme or set of methods, it has sought to clarify the ethical, relational and pedagogical foundations that support democratic learning in adult contexts. In our practice companion, we introduce a variety of methods and approaches to AELD for you to explore in your own context.

In our practice companion, we will offer a variety of approaches to AELD: from micro-methods, to interventions and a methodology.

Adult, professional and organisational education for democracy does not necessarily culminate in fixed outcomes, competencies or organisational states. Its significance lies in the ongoing cultivation of attentiveness, care and responsibility in how adults, professionals and organisations learn with and from one another.

By foregrounding democracy-as-becoming, democratic values, democratic sensibility, responsive pedagogy and the acceptive gaze, this Guide invites educators and learners to remain open to uncertainty, difference and change. In doing so, it supports democracy not as a destination to be reached, but as a lived, relational and embodied practice that continues to unfold across professional and civic life.

# 6. Resources

This section presents the essential conceptual, theoretical, and practical foundations of this Guide.

**Core AECED resources**

These documents provide the overarching framework for research and evidence-based findings used to develop the practical guides.

- AECED. (2023). D4.1 Report of methodological framework. Explains Participatory Action Research (PAR) as the common methodological ground for the AECED project.
- AECED. (2026). Pedagogical Framework. Explains the conceptual and theoretical foundation of AELD.
- AECED. (2026). Practice companion for Adult, Professional, Organisational Learning Guide

**AECED position papers**

These papers clarify the key concepts that anchor the project's shared conceptual framework:

- Woods, P. (2024). The four dimensions of holistic democracy. https://aeced.org/resources/ - Explains the interconnected dimensions of holistic learning, relational well-being, power-sharing, and transformative dialogue as guides for democratic action.
- Jääskeläinen, P., Woods, P., & Oganisjana, K. (2025). The importance of the aesthetic-embodied dimension in learning for democracy. https://aeced.org/resources/ - Articulates why involving the whole body is crucial for fully internalising and practising democratic values.

- Woods, P., & Pazur, M. (2025). Democratic sensibility. https://aeced.org/resources/ - Defines the felt and relational capacity for democratic engagement that AELD methods are intended to nurture.

## Operational tools and methodologies

Practical instruments for implementing AELD in practice:

- The Pattern Language of Commoning Card Deck: A toolkit of "solutionary patterns" used for reflection and envisioning democracy as a lived experience and the transformation towards it.

## Foundational theoretical references

The broader theoretical ecology that informs the pedagogical approach:

- Ball, S. J., & Collet-Sabé, J. (2025). Against school: Thinking education differently. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-80415-1 - In the joint papers, the authors Ball and Collet-Sabé argue for an alternative episteme of education, criticise modern schooling, and reimagine education without the institutional framework of the "grammar of schooling".
- Bollier, D., & Helfrich, S. (2019). Free, fair, and alive: The insurgent power of the commons. New Society Publishers. Provides the basis for understanding commoning as a social practice central to democracy-as-becoming.
- Collet-Sabé, J., & Ball, S. J. (2023). Beyond school: The challenge of co-producing and commoning a different episteme for education. Journal of Education Policy, 38(6), 895–910. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2022.2157890 - Suggests commoning as a new episteme for education.

- Collet-Sabé, J., & Ball, S. J. (2024). Without school: Education as common(ing) activities in local social infrastructures – An escape from extinction ethics. British Journal of Educational Studies, 72(4), 441–456. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2023.2298776 - Argues, how schools as alternative democratic institutions might look.
- Freire, P. (1972). Pedagogy of the oppressed. Penguin Books. Alerts on the power and knowledge involved in rationalities of learning – learning to have or to be – or to become.
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- Spahn, L; Weber, S.M. (forthcoming). Entangled Layers of learning: A methodological framework for PAR-research in multi-case-research settings. In: Meriläinen et al: Toward Democracy-as-Becoming: Routledge. Outlines the methodological framework for PAR research and reflects on feminist methodologies, too.
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# 7. List of acronyms

AELD – aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy

APOL – adult, professional and organisational learning

HE – higher education

PAR – participatory action research

PLC – pattern language of commoning