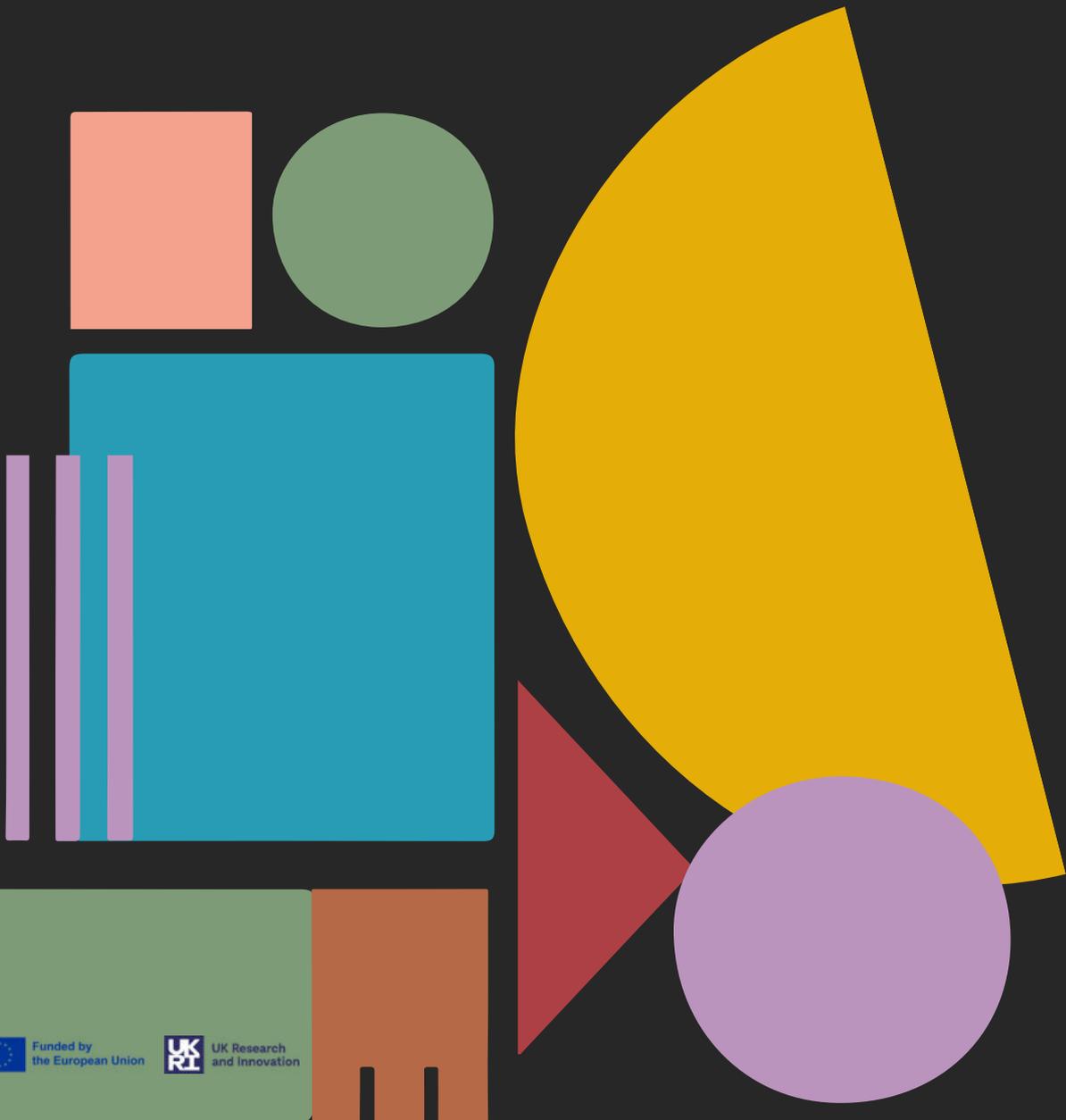


LIVING DEMOCRACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A GUIDE TO AESTHETIC AND EMBODIED
LEARNING FOR DEMOCRACY (AELD)



Funded by
the European Union



UK Research
and Innovation



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Funding

This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No. 101094052, and from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) - Reference Number: 10063654.

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Title and licence

Living democracy in higher education: A guide to aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD)

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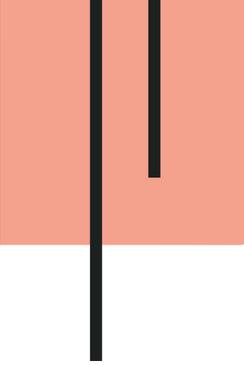
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This report can be cited as:

AECED Consortium (2026). Living Democracy in Higher Education: A Guide to Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD). DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.18614105](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18614105)



Acknowledgements

This guide was developed as part of the AECED Project — "Transforming Education for Democracy through Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy, Responsive Pedagogies and Democracy-as-becoming".

We thank:

- All participants and learning communities who engaged in AECED activities across educational phases, including learners, educators, facilitators, school and institutional staff, and families or community partners.
- The national teams in Croatia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Portugal and the UK for generating field-based evidence that directly informed the pathways and practices in this guide.
- Members of the AECED Consortium for their contributions to the Pedagogical Framework, the transnational synthesis (national cases and comparative analysis), and other resources.
- Reviewers who provided their guidance on clarity, conceptual coherence, and practical usability.



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1. Introduction

Higher education often teaches democracy through critical thinking, debate, and civic knowledge. Students learn about democratic systems, institutions, and procedures. But many students and educators experience democracy as distant, procedural, or symbolic: something that happens in committees, regulations, or formal representation, rather than in everyday learning.

And yet: democracy is interwoven into our everyday lives.

It is not a fixed system or an outcome to achieve. Within our communities, we continuously make and remake democracy through relationships, attentiveness, and shared action. Higher education is a lived pedagogical space where one not only studies democracy but also experiences, questions, and practices it with others.

Democracy resides in your seminars, studios, laboratories, supervision meetings, and online spaces. It appears in small, often unnoticed moments: in how voices are invited or silenced, how authority is exercised, how difference is approached, how disagreement is held, and how responsibilities for shared learning are negotiated. In these everyday encounters, democracy is not taught — it is lived.

Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD) emphasises this lived experience of learning democracy: how we sense, feel, listen, imagine, move, and relate with others in shared learning situations. These embodied and aesthetic dimensions shape democratic life at its foundations: attention, care, responsiveness, openness to difference, and the recognition of equality of worth.

This guide invites you to work with these foundations.



How this guide was developed

This guide is grounded in extensive research evidence showing how aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy can meaningfully reshape democratic practice in higher education. The AECED project (Transforming education for democracy through aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy, responsive pedagogies and democracy-as-becoming) conducted participatory action research in higher education, across Croatia, Finland and Germany before performing cross-case analysis and national deliberative dialogues to explore both the challenges facing democratic practice in higher education and the pedagogical possibilities for responding to them through AELD. Across these contexts, the evidence demonstrates that — even within hierarchical, time-pressured, and performance-driven university environments — AELD can foster:

- Shifts in understanding democracy: from an abstract concept to a lived experience.

Project results: Democracy is encountered as an ongoing, relational process — democracy-as-becoming — experienced through everyday learning practices, shared decision-making, and the negotiation of responsibility, difference, and authority in pedagogical relationships.

- Heightened awareness of power, inclusion, and relational dynamics in learning.

Project results: Through embodied and aesthetic practices, learners and educators develop a democratic sensibility that makes power relations, inclusion and exclusion, and ethical responsibility more perceptible, often emerging gradually through experience rather than explicit instruction.

- 
- Epistemic transformation, where knowledge is co-created rather than transmitted.

Project results: AELD integrates thinking, feeling, and sensing, supporting holistic learning in which knowledge is produced through shared inquiry, multiple modes of meaning-making (including silence, movement, image, and gesture), and openness to uncertainty and plurality.

- Greater professional reflexivity and ethical responsibility among educators.

Project results: The evidence shows that democratic learning is rarely smooth or harmonious; it often involves discomfort, vulnerability, tension, and disagreement. AELD does not seek to eliminate these experiences, but supports educators in holding them with care, responsiveness, and ethical attention, recognising them as integral to democratic becoming rather than as failures of pedagogy.

Taken together, the project's results show that working with AELD in higher education is not an optional add-on but a necessary pedagogical orientation. By reconnecting democratic ideals with everyday educational practice, AELD enables democracy to be learned not only as knowledge, but as a lived, ethical, and relational experience.



How to use this guide

Rather than offering prescriptions or institutional reforms, the guide focuses on what is already within your pedagogical reach: the everyday micro-practices through which democracy is enacted in teaching, learning, and academic relationships. We do not aim to democratise governance structures or promote political positions. Instead, we attend to how democracy is practised — moment by moment — through pedagogical choices, relational conditions, and shared learning processes.

The guide is designed to be practical, flexible, and modular. You do not need new programmes or a radical redesign of the curriculum. You can begin where you are: with facilitation choices, embodied and multimodal invitations, reflective dialogue, and attentiveness to how learning is experienced. You may work with one principle, one section, or a sequence of pathways — depending on your context, readiness, and institutional conditions.

This guide can be used in different ways, depending on your role, needs, and contexts. If you work as or with:

- a higher education teacher in any discipline
- a teacher educator, or doctoral supervisor
- an educational developer or academic leader
- cultural, artistic, or community partners working with universities
- a policy actor or institution representative concerned with education for democracy

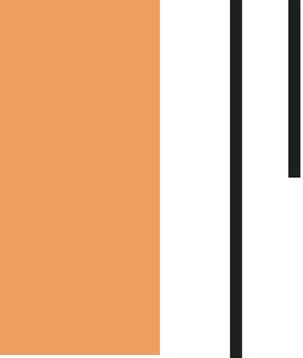


Wherever you act in the higher education setting at the moment, you can use this guide:

- for conceptual grounding in AELD and education for democracy
- as orientation for designing responsive, inclusive, and embodied learning environments
- as a reflective resource for examining power, participation, and relational dynamics in teaching and learning
- as a companion for pedagogical experimentation

The guide offers conceptual explanations and reflective questions for practitioners.

The Practice Companion to this guide provides practical examples of AELD.



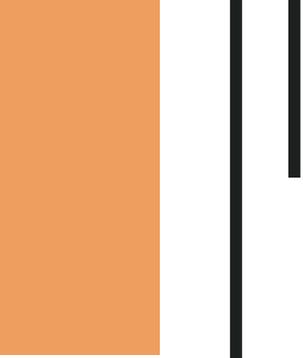
2. Space for, and with, AELD in Higher Education

As an actor in higher education, you already shape spaces where democracy is experienced — sometimes intentionally, often implicitly. Yet democratic learning in higher education is often limited by hierarchical traditions, performative assessment cultures, time pressures, and an overemphasis on cognitive achievement.

AELD invites you to attend to, and actively engage in, the making of these spaces, in encounters where democracy is becoming, in two interconnected ways: by creating space for aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy, and by being part of this space as democracy unfolds through AELD in practice.

Creating space for AELD in higher education means:

- opening conditions for democratic learning within existing courses and programmes, without adding new content or structures
- attending to how participation is invited, supported, or constrained in everyday learning situations
- making room for multiple forms of expression beyond verbal debate, including embodied, visual, sensory, and reflective modes
- structuring time and pace in ways that allow reflection, uncertainty, and meaning-making to emerge
- recognising learning environments — physical, digital, and relational — as active pedagogical spaces rather than neutral containers

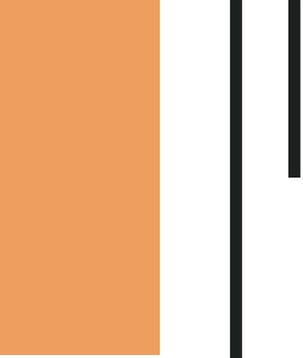


Being part of a learning space with AELD in higher education involves:

- staying attentive to relational, emotional, and embodied dynamics as learning unfolds
- engaging with difference, disagreement, and uncertainty as part of democratic learning rather than as obstacles to be managed away
- reflecting on how authority, responsibility, and recognition are enacted in your pedagogical role
- modelling democratic ways of listening, responding, and holding vulnerability and tension
- co-shaping learning experiences with students through shared responsibility and openness to plurality

You can strengthen democratic learning through small-scale pedagogical shifts or micro-practices: choose facilitation strategies that invite participation, create opportunities for reflection, use multimodal invitations, and cultivate a sense of relational safety. These micro-practices won't transform institutions overnight, but they can meaningfully reshape how you and your students experience democracy in everyday learning.

Creating and sustaining such spaces requires attention to relational and emotional safety. When learners feel recognised, respected, and supported, they are more willing to participate, to take risks, and to remain engaged even when learning becomes challenging or uncomfortable. Safe learning spaces do not eliminate tension or disagreement; rather, they make it possible to stay present with difference, uncertainty, and vulnerability. In this way, relational safety becomes a key condition for democratic learning — allowing democracy to be practiced not only through discussion, but through how people learn, relate, and grow together.



3. Democratic values in higher education

Values are principles that guide us. In a democratic society, specific values shape everyday life grounded in justice and fairness, pluralism, respect for diversity, and participation.

In educational institutions, particularly in higher education, such values function as guiding orientations. They can inform action in all contexts — formal, non formal, and informal — that emerge in academic life. These values are important to keep in mind and to allow us to grow with them through activities, projects, and discussions.

Values are often not explicitly articulated; they are not solely conveyed through the words of a lecture. Rather, they are felt in the way someone speaks, embodied in processes of critical thinking and co-creation, and made visible through respectfulness and the recognition of vulnerability.

Democratic values enable everyone to access higher education in full. They invite people not merely to be present but to truly participate in the shared space and encounter, and to grow with others.

The *Connecting with Democracy: A Pedagogical Framework for Education for Democracy*, identifies three core democratic values that orient learning for democracy across all educational phases:

- freedom
- equality and equity
- responsiveness



Freedom

Freedom means having real space to think, feel, express, and act together with others. It is something we encounter every day in educational settings. Freedom is relational — it means being free with others, not free from them.

It is not about everyone doing whatever they want, nor is it only about following a curriculum. It is about everyone having a voice in shaping learning processes, where meaning is created together. Freedom gives learners and educators the opportunity to express themselves in different ways — through the body, emotions, and creativity — without fear of judgement.

Freedom is not something you simply have or don't have; it's not static. It is something that grows through practice, again and again. It means creating learning spaces where everyone can truly be present.

Keeping in mind what higher education looks like today, you might ask yourself a few questions about your own work to help guide you towards embracing freedom:

- Can everyone express themselves in ways other than only verbally or cognitively?
- Are people allowed to question, doubt, and not know yet, without fear of being judged?
- Is there space for everyone to have a voice in the learning process?
- Does everyone have the opportunity to feel safe enough to change their mind?



Equality and equity

Equality and equity mean recognising that we do not all start from the same place, and that fairness is not about treating everyone the same, but about responding to people's different needs, experiences, and conditions. Equality and equity are achieved through how we listen and respond to one another — not only to what is said, but also to what we see and feel.

They are not about lowering expectations or offering special treatment. They are about creating conditions where everyone has a real possibility to participate, to learn, and to be recognised. Equality and equity mean noticing whose voices are easily heard and whose are often missing, and actively working to open space for those who are less visible or less confident to enter the conversation.

Equality and equity grow through practice. They are not fixed principles that are “applied once”, but lived elements that are continually negotiated in relationships. They require attentiveness, care, and a willingness to adjust learning processes, roles, and rhythms so that participation becomes possible for everyone. It is important to begin by recognising existing inequalities and hierarchies, and to respond to them as the starting point of your work.

Keeping in mind what higher education looks like today, you might ask yourself a few questions about your own work to help guide you towards equality and equity:

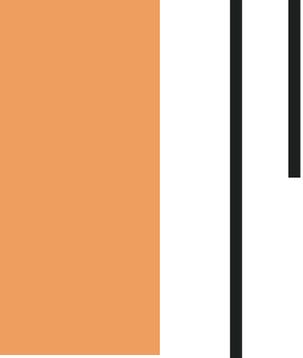
- Who finds it easy to participate here, and who might need different forms of support or invitation?
- Are different backgrounds, abilities, bodies, and experiences recognised as resources for learning, rather than as obstacles?
- Have gender perspectives been considered?
- Do learning processes allow for different tempos, expressions, and ways of engaging?
- Are power relations — between teachers and students, and among students or teachers — acknowledged and gently challenged?

Responsiveness



Responsiveness means being attentive and open to what is happening in the moment, and being willing to respond to people, situations, and relationships as they unfold. It is about noticing others: their words, bodies, emotions, even their silences.

Responsiveness is not about having all the answers or following a fixed plan, no matter what. It is about being able to pause, listen, and adjust. It means allowing learning processes to change when something important emerges, and recognising that meaningful learning often happens in unexpected ways.



Responsiveness grows through relationships. It asks everyone involved in the process to stay present, and not just be there, but to care, and to take responsibility for how their actions affect others. It is closely connected to trust, to the feeling that everyone is being seen and taken seriously.

Keeping in mind what higher education looks like today, you might ask yourself a few questions about your own work to help guide you towards responsiveness:

- Do I notice what is happening in the room, beyond what is planned or expected?
- Am I willing to adjust my approach when students' needs, emotions, or questions emerge?
- Is there space to slow down, pause, or change direction when something important appears?
- Do people feel seen, heard, and responded to in ways that matter to them?

Democratic values as lived experience

A seminar in a higher education setting

The seminar topic is reflective practice and professional development. Prior to the session, students received a text on reflexive practice and a set of reflective questions: What have I achieved so far? Where do I want to be? What are my fears? What kind of professional am I becoming?

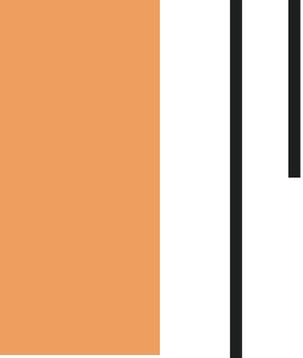
When the seminar begins, the educator sits down among the students and says simply: “We can begin with an open discussion.”

Then they remain silent.

For almost thirty minutes, they do not intervene. They observe.

A few students begin speaking almost immediately. They comment on the text, connect it to theory, and gradually try to steer the discussion. While speaking, they often glance at the educator, searching their face for confirmation that what they are saying is ‘right’. Some students refer carefully to their notes; others speak from personal experience. Some have clearly prepared; others improvise.

Several students remain silent throughout. At times, the room fills with an awkward stillness — students avoid eye contact and shift in their seats. Eventually, someone speaks again, almost to relieve the discomfort rather than to add something new.



Freedom

In this situation, freedom is not comfortable. There is no immediate guidance, no validation, no clear signal of what counts as a “good” contribution. Yet this is precisely where freedom is being tested and made visible.

Students are free to speak — or not to speak. They are free to draw on theory, experience, or uncertainty. The educator does not direct the content or pace of the discussion, nor do they resolve ambiguity. By withholding evaluation, they open a space where meaning is not predetermined.

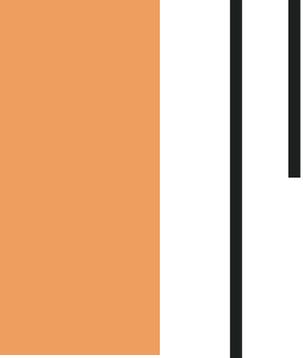
At the same time, this freedom exposes how accustomed students are to external authority. Many experience freedom not as a possibility but as insecurity, revealing how deeply ingrained academic habits of confirmation and correctness are.

Equality and equity

After the discussion, the educator asks everyone to take a piece of paper and respond individually to three questions: How was this situation? How did I feel? How did I behave?

The written reflections reveal a shared emotional landscape. Students describe the situation as uncomfortable, frustrating, and even embarrassing. Many write about embarrassment, fear of speaking, fear of making mistakes, and a strong expectation that someone “above them” should lead the discussion and confirm what is correct.

By shifting from spoken discussion to private writing, the educator creates an alternative pathway for participation. Voices that were silent in the discussion now become visible. Equality is affirmed not through equal speaking time, but through equal recognition of experience. Equity is enacted by allowing different modes of expression and by taking seriously emotions that often remain hidden in academic settings. Students begin to recognise how power, hierarchy, and confidence shape who speaks and who withdraws — and how these patterns are not individual failures, but shared conditions of learning. They start to recognise that they were learning from each other, from those who spoke, and therefore understand that they have a responsibility towards one another in the joint process of learning.

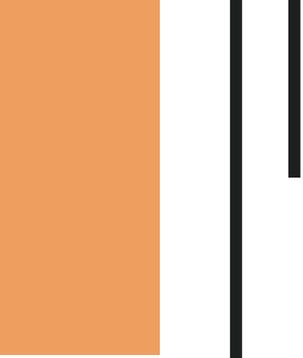


Responsiveness

The conversation continues, now focused explicitly on how students tend to behave in such situations. Many describe withdrawing, remaining silent, or deferring to others because of fear, embarrassment, or discomfort speaking in front of peers. The educator listens attentively, adjusting the seminar's direction in response to what has emerged rather than returning to a pre-planned agenda.

They then connect these experiences to their professional identities. What does it mean to be a reflective professional if fear consistently silences you? What capacities need to be developed — not only cognitively, but emotionally and relationally — to act responsibly within the profession?

Responsiveness here is embodied and relational. The educator responds to the atmosphere in the room, to the students' emotions, and to the meanings that surfaced through silence as much as through speech. The educator comments that some students were seeking the educator's gaze to confirm what they had said — even a look becomes part of the learning process. Reflection is no longer only about analysing practice at a distance, but about noticing oneself in the situation — how one feels, reacts, withdraws, or takes responsibility.



By the end of the seminar, students recognised that this experience was reflective practice. Democracy was not discussed as a concept, but enacted through the conditions of learning. Freedom was experienced as uncertainty and possibility, equality and equity as the recognition of different forms of participation and vulnerability, and responsiveness as the capacity to notice, reflect, and adjust one's professional way of being.

The seminar becomes a lived lesson in what it means to grow into a profession — not by avoiding discomfort, but by learning to stay with it, reflect on it, and take responsibility within shared educational spaces.

AECED case 4: Croatia – higher education



4. Democratic principles in higher education

Democratic principles show how democratic values become lived, felt, and practised in learning environments. In higher education, these principles actively shape the everyday conditions in which you, your students, and colleagues encounter authority, participation, dialogue, and belonging.

In AELD, democratic principles are not tools you ‘apply’ or techniques you ‘implement’. Instead, they guide your pedagogical stance — how you design learning environments, and how relationships evolve in your classroom.

The four democratic principles the AECED project has identified are:

- power-sharing
- transforming dialogue
- holistic learning
- relational well-being

Taken together, these four principles orient higher education pedagogy toward democracy-as-becoming. You enact these principles in ways that respond to your discipline’s traditions, your institution’s culture, and the diverse experiences your students bring with them. They don’t point you to fixed methods or prescriptive steps, but by working with these principles, you invite students into learning spaces where democracy is not just taught — it is practised, embodied, and continually unfolded.



Power-sharing

Power-sharing is the intentional negotiation of authority, influence, and responsibility in learning. In higher education, authority often feels firmly anchored in expertise, credentials, and institutional status. AELD doesn't dismiss these realities, but it invites you to make authority relational, responsive, and open to co-creation.

In AELD, power-sharing means creating real opportunities for students to shape their learning experience. You still hold responsibility for ethical boundaries, curricular coherence, and the relational climate of the learning environment. But within those commitments, you actively open space for students to influence.

Students may feel power-sharing in action when:

- their contributions meaningfully redirect or deepen the line of inquiry
- roles within an activity are negotiated rather than predetermined
- established conventions are disrupted, and familiar practices are questioned and re-imagined together
- you make your choices and reasoning transparent — and invite dialogue about them

Through these experiences, students encounter democracy not as a distant ideal or a system managed by others, but as a lived practice of shared responsibility. They learn that democratic engagement is neither delegation nor control — it is co-authoring the conditions of learning together.



Transforming dialogue

Transforming dialogue recognises that democratic dialogue is far more than spoken argument or debate. In AELD, you invite dialogue to unfold through many modes of expression — silence as well as voice, gesture, image, movement, writing, digital media, and reflective pauses.

This principle expands who can participate meaningfully and how understanding is co-created. Transforming dialogue asks you not only to encourage speaking but to cultivate deep listening. It acknowledges that meaning often emerges through embodied and aesthetic engagement long before it is ready to take conceptual form.

You might see transforming dialogue in action when:

- students explore ideas creatively or through embodied practice before moving into analytical discussion
- reflective spaces give everyone time to sense, notice, and shape meaning together
- disagreement is held as a generative moment — an opening for understanding rather than something to resolve

By working with this principle, you support democratic learning that embraces difference in relational, ethical, and open-ended ways. It turns dialogue into a shared practice of making meaning, not just exchanging arguments.

Holistic learning



Holistic learning recognises that democratic understanding grows through the integration of thinking, feeling, sensing, imagining, and acting. Yet in higher education, learning is still too often narrowed to cognitive mastery alone — pushing the embodied, emotional, and imaginative dimensions of experience to the margins, even though they shape ethical judgement and relational awareness.

AELD brings these dimensions back to the centre. In this approach, emotions, bodily awareness, and imagination are not distractions from academic rigour — they are vital resources for engaging complexity, uncertainty, and plurality in meaningful ways.

You might notice holistic learning at work when:

- learning activities invite students to attend to emotional and relational dimensions alongside conceptual analysis
- imagination is used to explore alternative perspectives, possibilities, or futures
- reflective practices weave together cognitive insight with embodied and affective awareness

Through holistic learning, students develop capacities that sustain democratic life: empathy, attentiveness, ethical judgement, and a genuine openness to being changed by what — and whom — they encounter.



Relational well-being

Relational well-being refers to the emotional and relational conditions that enable democratic learning. In higher education, students' willingness to participate, take intellectual risks, or engage meaningfully with difference is shaped by whether the learning environment feels safe, respectful, and responsive to them.

In AELD, relational well-being is not an individual trait or a matter of 'personal resilience'. It is something you and your students co-create — through your facilitation choices, the norms you establish together, and the quality of your pedagogical relationships. Relational and emotional safety support participation, but they do not necessarily require comfort or agreement; democratic learning often asks us to stay present even in discomfort, and to work with conflicts constructively.

Practices that strengthen relational well-being include attentive facilitation, pacing that leaves room for reflection, and ways of responding to others that emphasise recognition before evaluation. The acceptive gaze, introduced later in this guide, is a key practice for cultivating these conditions.

You might recognise relational well-being in moments when:

- students feel able to express uncertainty or disagreement without fear of being dismissed
- difference is met with curiosity rather than judgement
- educators and students take shared responsibility for maintaining respectful, inclusive learning climates

Relational well-being enables democratic learning by helping students stay engaged through tension, vulnerability, and change. It provides the relational grounding that allows democratic practices — not just democratic ideals — to take root.

Democratic principles as lived experience

Reflecting otherwise

“At the end of the semester, students who had co-researched and co-created within the project came to our research group’s building to reflect on their learning experiences through peer interviews. The setting itself already marked a shift. Instead of entering a standard seminar room, they stepped into our office space.

As they arrived on the third floor, their attention was drawn to the corridor. Along its full length, on the floor and on tables, we had laid out nearly two hundred images. The students also brought the Pattern Language of Commoning card decks, which had accompanied them throughout the seminar.

Students gradually gathered; those who had arrived earlier began drinking and snacking on the food prepared for them. Once all had arrived, we explained the peer-interview format and shared the interview guideline focusing on their experiences in the seminar: what supported their learning, what felt challenging, and how they experienced democracy through individual and collective learning.

Working in small groups, the students conducted peer interviews. The researchers did not join them in the rooms. Before moving into the interview rooms, we invited students to select images that best resonated with their experiences in relation to the interview guideline. Some students moved quickly, drawn to a particular image; others lingered, comparing images, hesitating, or putting them back before choosing. Returning to the rooms, they also selected pattern cards that felt relevant to their reflections. Only then did they turn on the voice recorders and begin the interviews.”



This vignette illustrates how reflection in higher education can be supported through aesthetic and embodied methods, even in practices such as interviews and seminar evaluation, which are often treated as purely cognitive or verbal. For many students, neither peer interviews nor image- or pattern-based reflection was a familiar method. Yet these unfamiliar formats opened a space for democratic relating, reflection, and learning.

Power-sharing was enacted by shifting who speaks, listens, and interprets. Students interviewed each other rather than being interviewed by teachers or researchers. While facilitators designed the framework and held ethical boundaries, students shaped the content, pace, and meaning of the reflection through their questions, images, and chosen patterns.

The process supported **transforming dialogue** rather than evaluation or debate. Transforming dialogue was present in the reflective space of the corridor and its images, and was experienced as students were encouraged to explore ideas through aesthetic engagement before moving into analytical discussion. The combination of peer interviews and visual materials encouraged attentive listening and reflection. Moments of hesitation, disagreement, or uncertainty were not resolved quickly but held as part of the learning process, allowing perspectives to evolve through encounter.

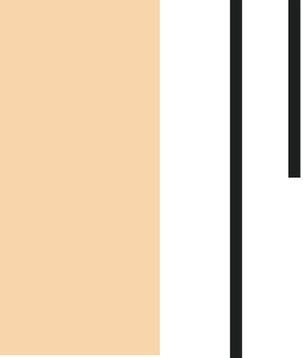


By working with images, pattern cards, movement, and pauses, the session enabled **holistic learning**. Reflection engaged not only analytical thinking but also emotions, bodily responses, and personal experiences. This supported different ways of making meaning and allowed students to connect individual moments with collective patterns.

Finally, attention to pacing, space, and peer-based interaction supported relational well-being. Sharing food, moving through the corridor, and reflecting in small groups helped create a sense of safety and trust. Democratic learning emerged not only in what was discussed, but also in how the learning space was shaped and experienced together.

This example shows that in higher education, engaging students in reflection through aesthetic and embodied methods can make learning processes more participatory, relational, and democratic.

AECED case 7: Germany - higher education



5. Working with aesthetic and embodied methods in higher education

Higher education offers multiple and flexible entry points for working with aesthetic and embodied methods to support democratic learning.

These approaches can be:

- integrated into regular lectures on any subject
- embedded within seminars and workshops, or
- developed through informal and non-formal activities such as student initiatives, collaborative projects, artistic interventions, or community-based actions

Aesthetic and embodied methods do not require a separate course on democracy; rather, they invite educators to work within existing structures to make democracy a lived experience that is ever-changing across the bodily, emotional, relational, and imaginative dimensions of learning.

You don't have to think about the content; what actually matters are relationships, participation, and how the learning experience is shaped.

Planning aesthetic and embodied methods for democratic learning: where to begin

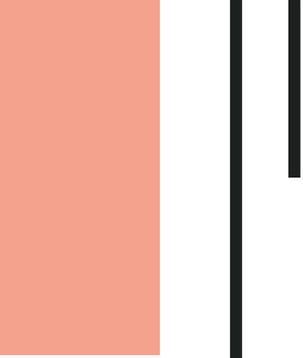
Rather than starting with predefined methods or outcomes, planning for aesthetic and embodied methods in higher education begins with a pedagogical orientation. In practice, this means taking a moment to reflect on the conditions you are creating for learning and participation, and on how democratic values and principles show up in your everyday pedagogical choices.

The planning process is not linear and does not follow a single model. It unfolds through attentiveness to context, students, institutional conditions, and your own pedagogical stance. An educator is invited to grow and develop with learners and learn from them.

At the same time, even with this flexibility in form, there are a few elements that are especially important to keep in mind and return to while planning any of the proposed activities.

There are three interconnected elements that always matter when we talk about education for democracy through aesthetic and embodied methods: democratic sensibility, responsive pedagogy, and the acceptive gaze.





6. Democratic sensibility

Democratic sensibility refers to a lived, embodied awareness of how democracy is experienced in everyday interactions. It cannot be taught directly as a skill or transferred through instruction. Instead, it develops gradually and as a part of a joint encounter, through repeated experiences of participation, recognition, responsibility, and shared meaning-making.

In higher education, democratic sensibility emerges through the quality of relationships within learning environments: how voices are heard, how differences are approached, how power is negotiated, and how responsibility for learning is shared. At the same time, it is also about who is part of the learning environment: how individuals relate to one another, how they communicate, and whose presence, experiences, and perspectives are recognised or marginalised.

Democratic sensibility frames democratic encounters of students and educators, not only in what is discussed, but in how learning feels and unfolds. Often, this awareness is sensed first — through bodily reactions, emotions, moments of discomfort or connection — and only later reflected upon. To develop democratic sensibility, the learning process must be open: open to different perspectives and open to the imagination of both learners and educators.

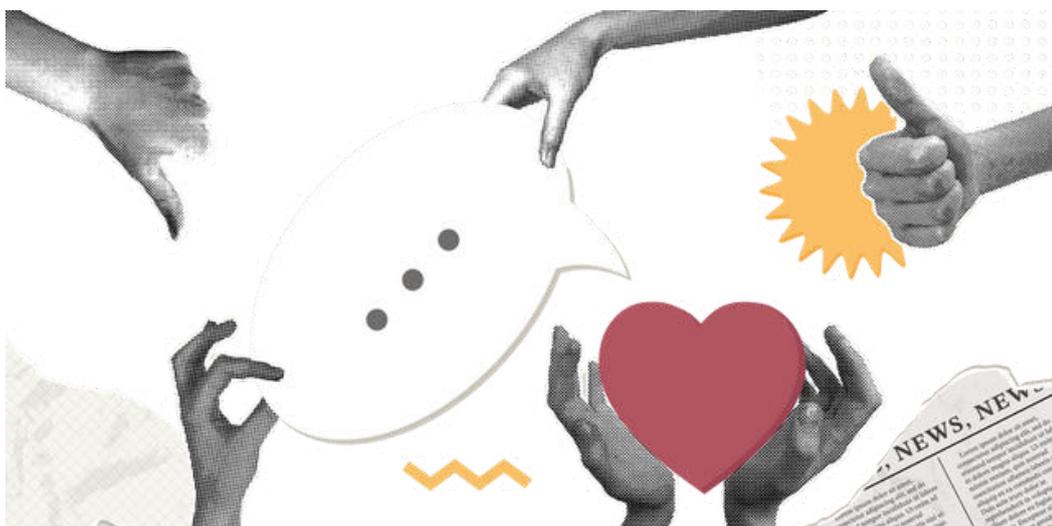
Developing democratic sensibility helps learners live democracy in their educational institution today, rather than learning about it as something that will happen in their future civic or professional roles. Through aesthetic, embodied, and relational learning experiences, democracy becomes tangible: something that is felt, negotiated, and practised in everyday educational encounters. It develops through participation, recognition, responsibility, and engagement with difference.

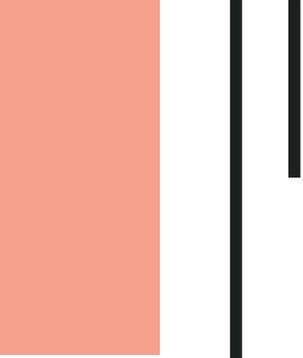
When planning work with aesthetic and embodied methods, educators can begin by asking if and how learning activities or different situations and moments allow democracy to be experienced, rather than only discussed.

Guiding questions:

- What kinds of participation does this learning situation enable — and for whom?
- How are differences (of background, confidence, embodiment, perspective) made visible and meaningful?
- What forms of responsibility are shared between students and educators?
- What might students feel about fairness, inclusion, or power through this experience?

These questions apply equally to lectures, seminars, and informal or non formal activities, helping educators recognise democracy as something lived in the present.





7. Responsive pedagogies

Responsive pedagogy refers to a way of being present, attentive, and open in teaching and learning situations. It is not a fixed method or a set of techniques that can be applied in the same way across contexts. Instead, it develops through ongoing attention to people, relationships, and situations as they unfold, and through a willingness to respond rather than simply follow predetermined plans.

In higher education, responsive pedagogy emerges through how educators and students attend to one another in learning environments: how verbal and non-verbal cues are noticed, how pacing and rhythms of interaction are shaped, and how moments of uncertainty, tension, or curiosity are held. At the same time, it is also about how educators relate to themselves — how they notice their own reactions, habits, and assumptions, and how these influence participation and power in the learning space.

Responsive pedagogy frames democratic encounters not only through what is planned, but through how learning unfolds in the moment. It involves staying attuned to bodily responses, emotional atmospheres, silences, and shifts in group dynamics. Often, responsiveness begins with noticing, a pause, a hesitation, a change in energy, and only later becomes a conscious pedagogical decision.

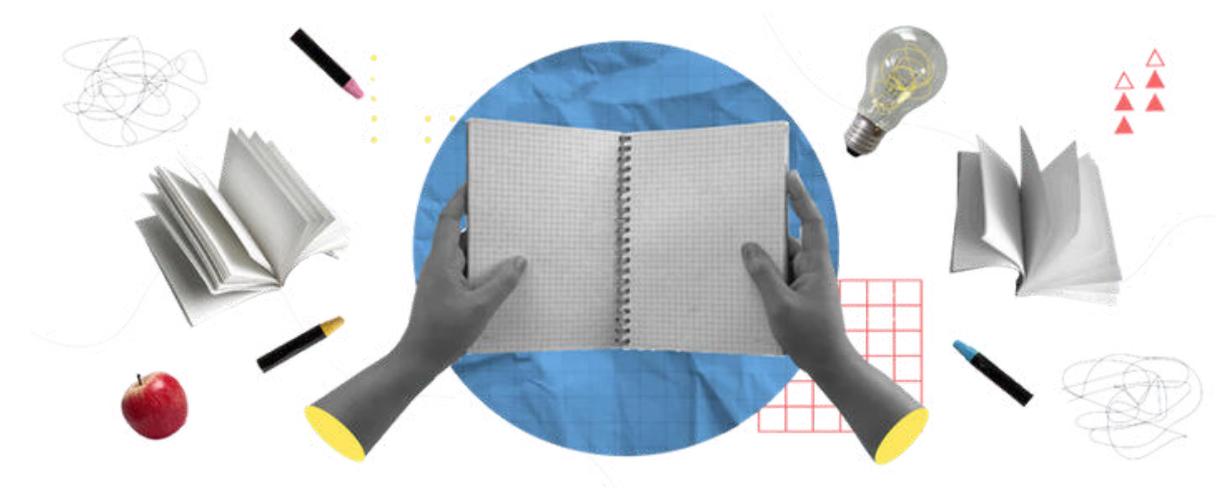
Developing responsive pedagogy helps educators and students engage with complexity rather than bypass it. It supports learning environments where uncertainty is not immediately resolved, where differences can be explored, and where emerging meanings are taken seriously. Through aesthetic, embodied, and relational learning experiences, responsiveness enables democracy to be lived as attentiveness, care, shared responsibility, and openness to change.

When planning work with aesthetic and embodied methods, educators can begin by asking how they will remain attentive and responsive to what emerges during learning, rather than only to what is intended or expected.

Guiding questions:

- How will I notice what is happening in the learning space beyond what I have planned? Will I reflect on that later? How?
- How can I respond to students' verbal and non-verbal cues, including silence, hesitation, or discomfort? How will I invite them to be more responsive to each other as well?
- Am I prepared, if needed, to slow down, pause, or adjust the learning process?
- How do my own bodily, emotional, and relational responses shape participation and safety?

These questions apply equally to lectures, seminars, and informal or non formal activities, supporting educators in creating learning environments where democratic engagement can emerge through responsiveness in practice.



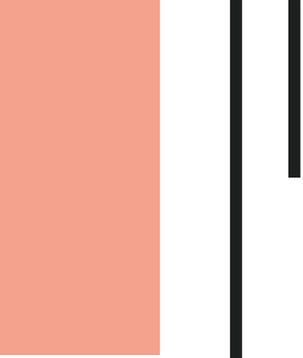
Pink balloon in lecture hall

A pink balloon floats in the air, just about to drift within reach of the students on the floor. One student, standing on a chair, stretches and grabs it just in time. Another on the floor reaches for the dangling string — the one I forgot to remove — but hesitates, unsure if it's allowed. I seize the moment and swap the balloon for a stringless version. The game goes on.

Excitement and playful energy fill the room, spreading to those seated. After a brief pause, some rush to help their disadvantaged classmates. Their longer limbs and higher jumps give them an edge, and they snatch the balloon from the chair group. Smiles widen, and when their eyes meet, they share the joy of success. The air is alive with energy and enthusiasm. When the exercise ends, students return to their seats with light steps, brimming with excitement.

It's hard to put into words what happens during the exercise, but something shifts. In a remarkable way, the topic touches students differently than in previous years. The moment when students — both participants and observers — immerse themselves in different positions while reaching for the balloon is powerful. Without words, through expressions and gestures, it becomes clear how they experience these roles. For an instant, it's as if they could feel what it means to be trapped by circumstances or, conversely, to enjoy privilege.

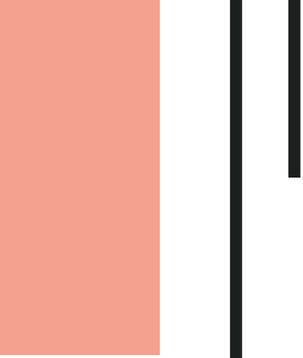
From the chair, a student wondered how others could reach the balloon, given that the upper group had the advantage of height. At first, control seemed easy from above, but when help arrived on the floor, the challenge grew. Those on the ground were clearly disadvantaged, and at times it felt pointless to try. Yet joy and excitement surfaced when the balloon drifted closer and the floor group managed to disrupt the upper team. In that weaker position, the temptation to bend the rules felt stronger.



Another student reflected on fairness. Equality, they thought, would mean everyone standing on the floor with the same rules. But the task revealed that even this would not be fair — some participants were very short, others quite tall. True fairness, they reasoned, would mean giving shorter participants chairs so their starting point matched the taller ones. Only then would the whole group have an equal chance to reach for the sky and grab the balloon.

The embodied exercise in the lecture reveals that bodily positions in the classroom — such as sitting on a chair or standing on the floor — are not neutral; they shape both agency and experience. It also shows how bodily experience is immediate yet open to interpretation. The body learns and feels in the moment, while also serving as a tool for reflecting on social structures and inequality. The exercise is not only physical but pedagogical — embodied learning makes group dynamics visible.

“Yet moments before the lecture, as I was inflating balloons in my office, I almost abandoned the idea. I hesitated, fearing the exercise might seem too childish in a university setting. But it was precisely the joy and energy of play that engaged students and sparked discussion on complex, often distant-seeming global economic issues. The entire exercise illustrates how embodiment can expose hidden power relations and possibilities for collaboration”.



Responsive pedagogy, in this vignette, is closely connected to equity and inclusion. It not only recognises but can actively educate on gendered, cultural, and experiential differences in participation. It emphasises that learning is always embodied and relational, and that higher education educators can create conditions in which democracy can be experienced through learning itself. Responsiveness here refers not only to attentiveness to students but also to awareness of one's own bodily, emotional, and relational responses in teaching situations. Responsiveness is cultivated an educator's capacity to notice moments of discomfort, defensiveness, or urgency in themselves and in holding uncertainty and ambiguity without prematurely resolving them.

AECED case 5: Finland - higher education

This vignette, where an educator innovated with a pink balloon during an annual lecture on global economic inequality, prompted students to reflect on their own privileges and how they relate to vulnerable groups. Responsive pedagogy, in this vignette, is closely connected to equity and inclusion. It not only recognises but can actively educate on gendered, cultural, and experiential differences in participation. It emphasises that learning is always embodied and relational, and that higher education educators can create conditions in which democracy can be experienced through learning itself. Responsiveness here refers not only to attentiveness to students but also to awareness of one's own bodily, emotional, and relational responses in teaching situations. Responsiveness is cultivated in an educator's capacity to notice moments of discomfort, defensiveness, or urgency in themselves and in holding uncertainty and ambiguity without prematurely resolving them.



8. The acceptive gaze

The acceptive gaze refers to a way of seeing and responding to others that prioritises recognition before judgement. It is a foundational embodied practice that supports emotional and relational safety in learning environments. It is not about avoiding critique or lowering academic standards. Rather, it shapes how judgement is held and when it is exercised, ensuring that learners are first recognised as persons of equal worth.

In higher education, where evaluation, critique, and assessment are central to academic life, the acceptive gaze plays a crucial role in shaping how students experience participation, risk-taking, and belonging. It frames democratic encounters not only through what is evaluated, but through how people are seen, addressed, and responded to in everyday learning situations.

The acceptive gaze involves responding to others with openness, attentiveness, and curiosity before moving to interpretation, evaluation, or critique. It is an embodied orientation rather than a technique, shaping tone, posture, pacing, and relational presence. Through the acceptive gaze, learners and educators are supported in expressing uncertainty, difference, and emerging ideas without fear of immediate dismissal or judgement.

The acceptive gaze operates at interconnected levels. It includes educators' attentiveness towards themselves, as they notice their own bodily, emotional, and relational responses — such as discomfort, urgency, or defensiveness — without immediate self-judgement. It also includes educators' ways of seeing and responding to students, by first witnessing what is present — ideas, emotions, gestures, or silences — before directing or evaluating. Finally, it extends to peer-to-peer interactions, as educators model and invite ways of listening and responding that prioritise recognition and respectful witnessing.



Developing the acceptive gaze supports emotional and relational safety as a precondition for aesthetic and embodied learning. Safety here does not mean comfort or consensus. It means creating conditions where learners can remain engaged in challenging, complex, and sometimes uncomfortable democratic encounters. When the acceptive gaze is present, learners are more likely to take risks, listen across differences, and stay engaged during moments of disagreement or uncertainty.

When planning work with aesthetic and embodied methods, educators can reflect on how the acceptive gaze will be cultivated within learning environments, recognising it as a shared pedagogical practice rather than an individual attribute.

Guiding questions:

- How can I encourage students to develop ways of seeing and responding that prioritise recognition over judgement?
- How do I acknowledge students' contributions before evaluating or critiquing them?
- What do my tone, posture, and pacing communicate about recognition and belonging?
- How do I respond to my own discomfort or defensiveness in moments of uncertainty? How do I invite learners to do the same?

These questions apply equally to lectures, seminars, and informal or nonformal activities, supporting learning environments grounded in recognition, care, and shared responsibility.



9. Everyday practices and pathways for higher education

This section offers five practical pathways you can use to bring AELD into your everyday teaching — without redesigning a course. Think of them as entry points, not steps. You can start with one pathway that fits your context, return to it over time, or combine several as your practice develops.

Pathway 1: Noticing and attunement

Use when you want to better understand what is happening in your learning space.

In practice: brief check-ins, noticing who speaks and who withdraws, tracking energy, silence, pace, and emotional atmosphere; naming what is sensed before analysing content.

Pathway 2: Multimodal meaning-making

Use when verbal discussion dominates, or when some students struggle to enter dialogue.

In practice: invite response through image, mapping, movement, sound, objects, short writing, or visual prompts — then bring these into shared reflection.



Pathway 3: Reflective dialogue

Use when you want to connect experience to learning and democratic awareness.

In practice: structured reflection after activities; dialogue that includes questions of power, inclusion, and responsibility; reflecting not only on “what we learned” but “how we learned together”.

Pathway 4: Shared responsibility and power-sharing

Use when you want learners to meaningfully shape aspects of learning within clear boundaries.

In practice: negotiated roles, student-led inquiry moments, co-created criteria or questions, rotating facilitation, shared agreements about discussion and feedback.

Pathway 5: Holding tension and difference

Use when conflict, discomfort, or uncertainty emerges — or when it is avoided.

In practice: slow down rather than resolve quickly; acknowledge discomfort; use practices that support listening across difference; create ways to disagree responsibly without fear of humiliation or withdrawal.

These pathways help you recognise that democratic learning is built through small, repeated pedagogical choices. Over time, they accumulate into a learning ecology where democracy is not only discussed, but experienced through participation, recognition, shared responsibility, and the capacity to stay engaged with difference.





10. Educator reflection prompts

Reflection is a central dimension of AELD. In higher education, reflection supports educators in attending to how democracy is enacted through everyday pedagogical relationships, decisions, and responses.

The prompts below are not intended as evaluation tools or checklists. They are invitations to ongoing reflexive inquiry that support educators in noticing how democratic values, principles, and sensibilities are lived in their teaching contexts.

Educators may engage with these prompts individually, with colleagues, or within professional learning communities. They can be revisited over time, as democratic learning is a non-linear and evolving process.

Attending to democratic values

- In what ways do learners experience freedom in my teaching? Where might freedom feel constrained, and why?
- How are equality and equity lived in practice? Whose forms of participation are most visible or valued?
- How do I notice and respond to learners' needs, emotions, and rhythms? Where is responsiveness present or missing?



Reflecting on democratic principles

- How is power shared, negotiated, or made visible in my teaching?
- What forms of dialogue are invited, and which remain marginal?
- How are thinking, feeling, and sensing integrated in learning experiences?
- What supports relational well-being in my learning environments, particularly in moments of tension or uncertainty?

Cultivating democratic sensibility

- What moments of discomfort, hesitation, or connection have emerged in learning interactions?
- How do learners and I respond to difference, disagreement, or ambiguity?
- What embodied or emotional cues signal shifts in democratic awareness?

Educator reflexivity

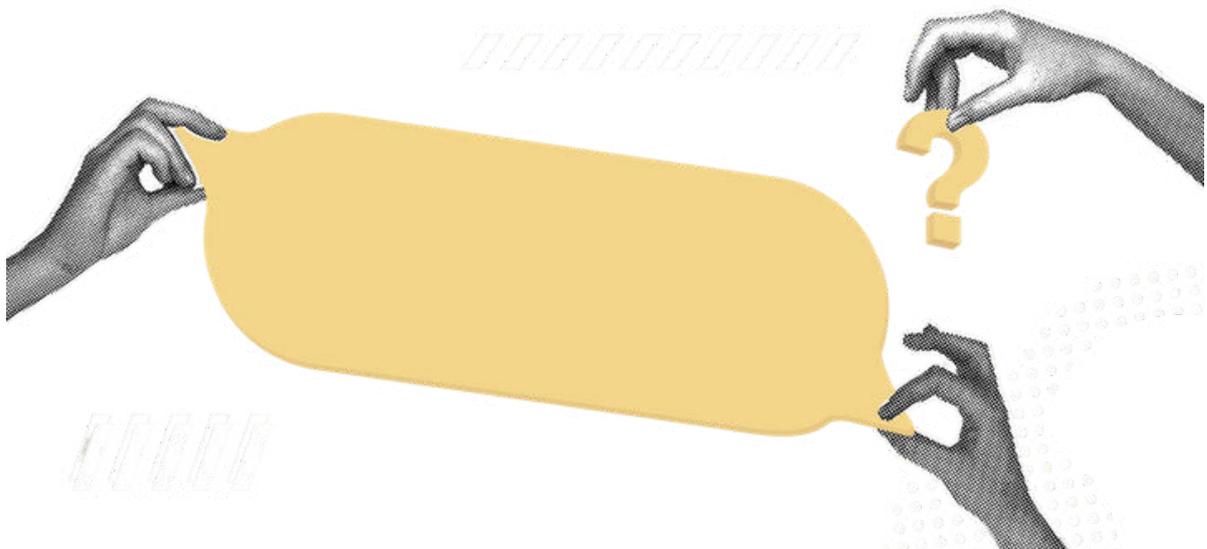
- What bodily, emotional, or relational responses do I notice in myself during teaching?
- How do my habits of authority, expertise, or control shape participation?
- In what ways do I practise an acceptive gaze towards myself, particularly in moments of uncertainty or difficulty?

Inclusion and ethical responsibility

- How do gender, cultural background, language, or prior educational experiences shape participation in my learning environments?
- What assumptions about expression, confidence, or engagement might I be reproducing?
- How can I remain attentive to inclusion without fixing learners into categories?

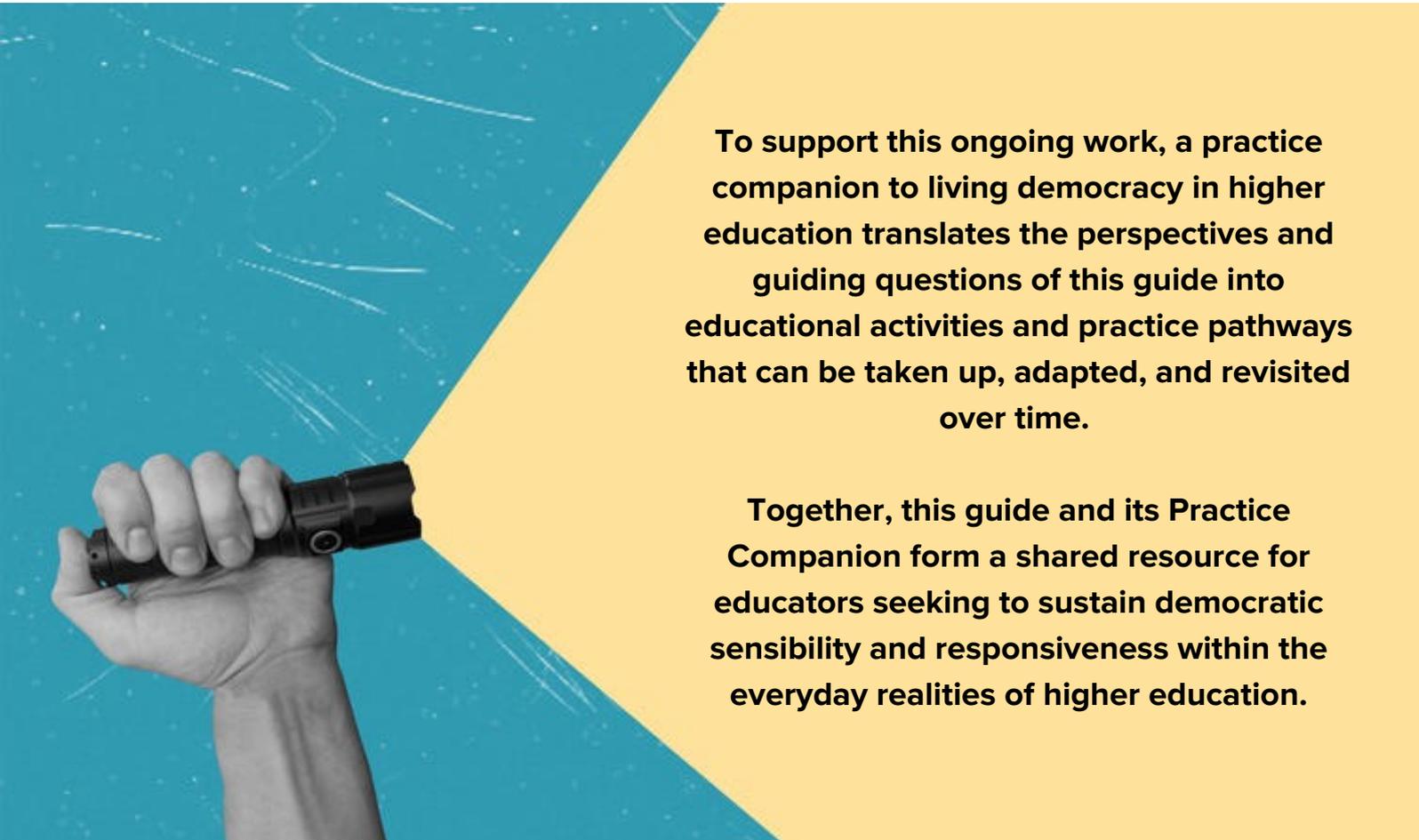
These prompts are not meant to be answered conclusively. They support a practice of noticing, pausing, and returning, helping educators remain open to learning from their own teaching.

Through reflective engagement, educators strengthen their capacity to cultivate democratic sensibility, responsiveness, and relational safety — supporting democracy-as-becoming in higher education.



11. Closing the guide and introducing the practice companion

This guide has proposed an understanding of democracy in higher education as a lived, relational, and embodied practice, cultivated through everyday pedagogical choices rather than through prescriptive models. By foregrounding aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD), it has invited educators to attend to how participation, authority, difference, and responsiveness are enacted in the ordinary moments of teaching and learning.



To support this ongoing work, a practice companion to living democracy in higher education translates the perspectives and guiding questions of this guide into educational activities and practice pathways that can be taken up, adapted, and revisited over time.

Together, this guide and its Practice Companion form a shared resource for educators seeking to sustain democratic sensibility and responsiveness within the everyday realities of higher education.