CONNECTING WITH DEMOCRACY IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

A Guide to aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy

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Connecting with democracy in secondary education: A Guide to aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy

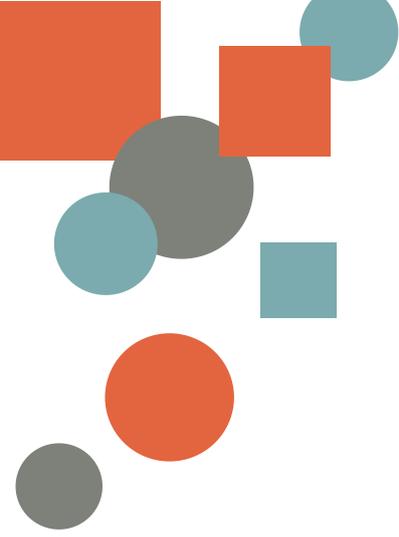**Accessibility and use with read-aloud tools**
This document is designed to support use with read-aloud tools and assistive technologies. The text is organised in a clear, numbered structure and presented in a logical reading order to support audio reading. Images and diagrams include alternative text 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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1. Introduction

This is a Guide for creative action. It is designed to accompany the AECED Pedagogical Framework, Connecting with Democracy, which sets out the conceptual foundations and arguments underpinning aesthetic and embodied education for democracy (AELD). It offers practical guidance for the secondary phase of education, based on the ideas in the Framework and the results of participatory action research trials conducted by the Horizon Europe and UKRI funded AECED Project.

The Guide is one of four phase-specific Guides that translate the Framework into pathways suited to different educational contexts: Early Years and Primary Education, Secondary Education, Higher Education, and Adult, Professional and Organisational Learning. The Guides are designed to help educators for democracy cultivate a personal and shared feel for and appreciation of democracy, which is described later as democratic sensibility.

The purpose of the Guide is to offer educators accessible, flexible pathways for integrating AELD into secondary education.

The Guide is designed to be used creatively and collaboratively. It is not a set of instructions to be followed.

The Guide is for:
- teachers and other educators in all subject areas and in extracurricular contexts
- school leaders developing cultures that support learning for democracy
- cultural, artistic, and community partners collaborating with secondary schools and other secondary education settings
- youth workers and NGOs contributing to democratic learning environments
- policy actors shaping strategies for education for democracy and democratic education

The Guide reflects what has been learnt from the AECED participatory action research trials and deliberative dialogues across schools. It acknowledges that educators in secondary education work under significant constraints — such as large classes, exam pressures, and limited time.

The Guide comes with a Practice Companion that provides practical illustrations to support creative design and implementation of AELD activities. The Practice Companion includes activity cards, templates, extended examples, and planning resources.

Introducing or extending AELD does not necessarily require adopting new programmes or revising or reinventing curricula; it can also support everyday change that brings democratic values and principles to life through simple, adaptable practices and activities that fit within existing lessons, routines, and contexts. AELD can therefore take many forms. These range from short activities and embedded everyday practices (examples of which are given in the Guide and in the Practice Companion) and longer sessions or exercises (examples of which are in the Practice Companion).

The remainder of this Introduction provides:
- a brief introduction to AELD
- a summary of educators' roles in AELD
- a summary of the key ideas of AELD
- guidance on how to use this Guide

The Introduction is then followed by sections, which:
- explain why AELD matters in secondary education (section 2)
- discuss the key ideas of AELD in the context of secondary education (sections 3 to 7)
- offer accounts of illustrative episodes, based on the AECED research, that bring to life some of the experience and complexity that can characterise AELD in secondary schools (sections 8 and 9)
- share ideas about AELD environments and everyday practices (sections 10 and 11)
- offer suggestions about activities to support reflection on the Guide (section 12)
- invite exploration of the Practice Companion (section 13)

A brief introduction to AELD

Aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD) is an approach to education for democracy. It centres learning through movement, bodily awareness, and creative expression. It also includes sharing and reflecting on feelings, and on aesthetic and bodily senses. AELD helps learners and educators connect with democratic values and principles. It strengthens the human qualities that make democracy possible, and supports more democratic ways of relating to others.

AELD creates opportunities for learners to explore democracy as a relational and lived practice. It invites students to experience democracy through embodied participation. It recognises that young people think, feel, sense, imagine, move, and create as part of their meaning-making. This multimodal and embodied engagement allows democratic values to become felt and enacted, not only discussed.

The aims of AELD are to
- cultivate democratic qualities, such as humility, respect, curiosity, empathy, active listening, collective responsibility and openness to otherness and new possibilities
- increase awareness of aesthetic and embodied senses and feelings
- encourage democratic ways of learning and creating knowledge
- connect with democracy holistically, moving beyond a purely cognitive engagement with democracy to exploring it aesthetically, bodily and relationally with others
- be a learning journey of discovery filled with possibilities
- cultivate democratic sensibility, that is, enhanced awareness and appreciation of the feelings, bodily senses and human qualities that are important in democratic activity.

AELD offers ways to explore — through activities, reflection and dialogue — the aesthetic and embodied dimensions that are integral to a flourishing, living practice of democracy. It engages the whole body in processes of shared meaning-making and co-creation. It gives particular attention to emotions, feelings, sensations and bodily movement, as well as creative, imaginative and other capabilities, without a dominating emphasis on linear and logical thinking, which tends to emphasise cognitive knowledge.

AELD practices are therefore multimodal, incorporating aesthetic and embodied pedagogical activities. These activities are not about producing art objects or putting on performances, but about communicating and learning through creative processes — opening spaces where people can listen, imagine and co-create. They can include:

- collage, drawing, painting, and photography — to express perceptions visually
- movement and drama — to explore relationships
- storytelling — articulate meaning through narrative
- sound, rhythm, and performance – to engage attention, emotion, and collective expression
- mindful or sensory exercises – to deepen awareness of self, others, and environment

Spaces which are opened up for AELD and for the cultivation of democratic relationships:

- invite participation ("Your voice belongs here")
- support multimodal expression (many ways to contribute: movement, image, sound, digital media, performance)
- provide temporal flexibility (time for reflection, depth, rehearsal, return, revision)
- hold relationships with care (enabling risk-taking, disagreement and vulnerability)
- welcome imagination as a mode of inquiry and civic possibility
- practice acceptance (open, non-judgemental and attentive to what emerges rather than imposing control)

A summary of educators' roles in AELD

Educators can play different roles in AELD, including being learners themselves. Sometimes they may play more than one role. The roles of educators can include:

- co-learners who explore dilemmas, creativity, and uncertainty alongside students
- designers or co-designers of aesthetic, embodied, and multimodal pathways for democratic inquiry
- facilitators of agency, rather than distributors of tasks or controllers of discussion
- practitioners of acceptance (a non-judgmental view emphasising attentiveness and acceptance), modelling respectful seeing and listening (see the acceptive gaze in Table 1)
- builders of inclusive climates with colleagues, leaders, community partners and students
- reflective practitioners who examine how power, recognition, and responsiveness shape learning
- followers of collective decisions

A summary of key ideas underpinning AELD

A rich set of ideas underpins AELD. These key ideas are summarised in Table 1, following.

Table 1: Key ideas underpinning AELD.

Democracy as-becoming	An understanding of democracy as a living, unfinished process, continually created through our interactions, choices and relationships. Democracy is not a fixed system. Nor is it only a political system, an organisational form of governance or a set of rules. It is a living process that is continually in movement, something we practise and renew every day — in how we speak, listen, collaborate, and care.
Democratic values	These are the core democratic values at the heart of AELD. Freedom. The ability to think, act and express oneself openly and responsibly. Equality and equity. Everyone is valued and everyone's voice, body, and experience matter. Equality requires that each receives the same as everyone else — for example, the same rights and responsibilities. Equity requires that each receives what they need to enable them to enjoy equal opportunity. Responsiveness. This means attentiveness to others' needs, voices, experiences and to one's bodily resonances (emotions, sensations, and thoughts) that are emerging while relating with others.
Democratic principles	These principles, power-sharing, transforming dialogue, holistic learning, and relational well-being, describe what it means to practise democracy-as becoming and offer guides for action in creating democracy as a process of becoming. Power-sharing concerns active involvement in shaping the institutions, culture and relationships that make up our social and organisational environment. It includes having a say in decisions that affect us, holding power-holders to account, contributing to new possibilities that emerge from dialogue and collaborative interaction, and individual discretion to take initiatives, express identity and act freely within the parameters of agreed values and responsibilities. Transforming dialogue involves exchanging and exploring views, engaging in open debate, practising mutual respect among participants, expressing diverse opinions, listening to all viewpoints, and enabling the sharing of constructive critique. Its purpose is to reach beyond narrow personal perspectives and interests, enhance mutual understanding, seek out areas of agreement, and create new possibilities for shared action. Holistic learning is learning that involves the whole person — intellect, emotion, body, and imagination. It consists of the development of all human capabilities, including not only linear thinking that emphasises cognitive knowledge but also, crucially, awareness, sensitivity, and appreciation in relation to such areas of experience as feelings, ethical and spiritual sensibilities, beauty, joy, suffering, and bodily sense. Relational well-being concerns the creation of social cohesion, a sense of connectedness and positive feelings of involvement through participation. It fosters feelings of empowerment and high self-esteem as members of a democratic community which values individuality.

Responsive pedagogy	Responsive pedagogy emphasises that education is a shared endeavour grounded in mutual responsibility and a continual flow of reciprocal learning. It calls for reflexivity and awareness of our aesthetic and bodily responses, while also demanding alertness and responsiveness to the broader context — including history, place, policy, and social positioning such as gender, class, and racial or ethnic identity.
Democratic sensibility	Democratic sensibility, in short, is a feel for democracy. It is the quality of being attentive to, appreciating, nurturing, and responding to senses, awareness, attributes, and feelings vital for the flourishing of democratic practice and relations and for connecting with others in more democratic ways.
Acceptive gaze	The acceptive gaze is a way of observing ourselves, others and the world that is open, curious, and non-judgemental — attentive to what emerges rather than imposing control. In education, it allows both educators and learners to recognise the value of what is present and to respond to it with empathy. This practice serves as an ongoing process of co-creating safe learning environments for aesthetic and embodied methods. The acceptive gaze is rooted in attentiveness and acceptance and fosters conditions for freedom, equality and equity, and responsiveness in educational practice and elsewhere.

AELD brings all of these elements together into an approach that enables young people and educators to feel, enact and reflect on democratic life — for example, how different ways of practising democratic values can affect how learners and educators see each other, and how their voice, presence and agency are recognised.

AELD helps people create experiences of democratic practice in secondary education that can be reflected upon. It helps people appreciate democracy as a living, unfinished process continually created through ongoing interactions, and shaped in multiple ways. For example, the creation and sustaining of democracy can involve:

- collaborative meaning-making through movement, performance, visual arts, film, and digital creation
- structured and unstructured dialogue: circles, peer-led discussions, reflective pauses, multimodal response formats
- co-designed routines, shared agreements, rotating roles, and classroom decision-making
- embodied reflection: body-mapping, emotion check-ins, journaling, improvisation, and perspective-taking exercises
- negotiating conflict with attentiveness, "soft eyes", and ethical listening
- micro-practices of relational well-being: recognising peers, offering support, noticing exclusion, creating space for quieter voices

How to use this Guide

The Guide is designed to be practical and adaptable. Educators may use one activity, one principle, or multiple principles, depending on the context and readiness.

You can:
- begin with short, low-risk activities
- explore longer exercises or sequences of activities
- integrate multimodal modes of expression and communication
- use reflective questions to deepen democratic awareness
- select activities that fit the size, schedule or subject of your classroom or other learning spaces
- adapt practices for online or hybrid contexts

2. Why AELD matters in secondary education

Secondary education marks a period of profound change in young people's development. Young people are navigating questions of identity, belonging, fairness and responsibility, while forming their emerging sense of self in relation to others. These years are marked by emotional intensity, heightened social awareness, and a growing desire to be recognised as capable contributors to shared life.

The aesthetic and embodied dimensions of pedagogy are essential in everyone's learning. But there are particular ways in which AELD can be utilised to support young people's education for democracy in the secondary education phase so that, for example, their emerging sense of self in relation to others is recognised and part of the learning. Rather than not recognising young people's emotions and feelings, AELD creates conditions where students can explore democratic values — freedom, equality and equity, and responsiveness — through multiple modes of expression that engage these, such as movement, gesture, visual creation, storying, listening and shared reflection. These modes enable young people to access democratic meaning through the cognitive, emotional, relational and bodily activities that characterise their developmental stage.

AELD strengthens learning for democracy in several ways:
- It supports relational well-being — young people participate more fully when they feel recognised and respected. AELD fosters relational conditions — such as trust, emotional safety, and openness — that enable students to take risks, express uncertainty, and share perspectives.
- It expands pathways to transforming dialogue — not all students enter democratic dialogue through speech. Some prefer image, movement, creative association, or quieter forms of contribution. AELD offers varied pathways to help dialogue become more equitable and inclusive.
- It nurtures attentiveness and responsiveness — through embodied and reflective practices, young people learn to notice how their actions affect others, how emotions shape interaction, and how shared decisions require attunement. This responsiveness is central to democratic life.

- It fosters holistic learning by connecting thinking, feeling, and sensing. In this way, AELD invites young people to explore complex ideas — combining analysis, imagination, bodily awareness, and emotional understanding. This integration supports deeper comprehension and ethical reflection.
- It fosters power-sharing by encouraging students to influence learning processes. Through these practices, students experience that their contributions matter. Even small opportunities for decision-making help them understand themselves as active participants in shared learning.
- It engages imagination as a democratic resource — creative and aesthetic practices help young people imagine alternatives, consider perspectives beyond their own, and explore possibilities for shared futures. Imagination strengthens civic curiosity and openness.
- It cultivates democratic sensibility. Through repeated embodied experiences of noticing, reflecting, collaborating and responding, young people can develop a sense of what fairness, inclusion, responsibility and connection mean in democratic practice. This sensibility becomes a foundation for democratic participation in and beyond secondary education.

The value of AELD is supported by findings from the AECED research. This research found that AELD can, for example, help cultivate qualities essential to democracy (such as empathy, active listening, and openness to otherness and new possibilities), increase awareness of aesthetic and embodied senses, encourage more democratic ways of learning and creating knowledge, and cultivate a heightened democratic sensibility. Such outcomes are of value as young people develop during secondary education.

3. Democratic values in secondary education

Democratic values shape how we relate to one another in learning environments. In secondary education, these values are not abstract ideas but experiences that emerge in everyday interactions — through how students express themselves, how they are welcomed into participation, how disagreements unfold and how they feel recognised within a group.

AELD allows young people to encounter democratic values through multimodal and embodied activities. This helps values become something students feel, explore and practise together. The Framework identifies core values essential to education for democracy: freedom, equality and equity, and responsiveness. Each value is now presented with examples of how it may come to life in secondary settings.

Freedom
Freedom refers to having space to express oneself authentically, explore ideas openly and make meaningful choices within shared ethical boundaries. For young people who are developing independent identities, freedom becomes tangible when they can bring their perspectives, creativity, and questions into learning.

What it can look like:
- students choose how to express an idea: through movement, drawing, writing, sound, or digital forms
- a class explores a theme by generating multiple interpretations before moving to analysis
- students contribute to shaping aspects of the task, such as how work will be presented or which questions deserve attention

Equality and equity

Equality means that every student's presence matters. Equity ensures that each student has accessible and meaningful ways to participate. Young people are acutely aware of inclusion and exclusion; even small cues can shape their willingness to contribute. AELD creates environments that welcome diverse modes of participation.

What it can look like:
- Activities include verbal, visual, embodied, written and reflective options.
- Discussion is organised to support balanced participation, helping quieter voices enter the space.
- Group tasks require students to notice and adjust to one another's tempo, ideas and expressive forms.

In secondary education, equity also involves recognising how class-based, racialised, and gendered expectations, social norms, and power relations can shape who feels able to speak, move, take risks, or remain silent. AELD supports equity by offering multiple, non-exclusionary ways to participate, so that students are not required to conform to dominant norms to belong or contribute.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness is the capacity to notice others — their cues, emotions, perspectives, and needs — and to adjust one's actions accordingly. It is a relational value that supports dialogue, collaboration, and the resolution of disagreement. Young people strengthen responsiveness when they have opportunities to reflect on how interactions feel and how their contributions shape group life.

What it can look like:

- Students participate in exercises that require them to sense the right moment to act, such as a shared rhythm.
- After group work, students reflect not only on outcomes but on how interactions affected them.
- Students are given creative freedom to express themselves and are invited to reflect on the modes of expression they use.
- Peer feedback begins with attentive witnessing, "I noticed…" before interpretation or suggestion.

4. Democratic principles in secondary education

In secondary education, the application and exploration of democratic principles help young people experience democracy not as an abstract system, but as a lived, relational process that unfolds through participation, dialogue, and shared responsibility. In secondary contexts, the principles are applied in ways that respond to young people's growing capacity for reflection, complexity, and relational awareness.

Power-sharing

Power-sharing means creating meaningful opportunities for students to influence aspects of the learning process. In secondary education, this may involve choices about how to explore a topic, how to work together, or how to express understanding.

Power-sharing does not mean transferring full responsibility to students. There are many forms (formal and informal) it may take, including carefully held spaces of agency within teacher-guided learning, where students experience their contributions as shaping the collective process.

Transforming dialogue

Transforming dialogue encourages mutual understanding and the shared exploration of diverse ideas, viewpoints, and experiences, and values curiosity, listening, and openness to difference.

In AELD, dialogue is multimodal. Students may engage through speech, gesture, drawing, silence, spatial positioning or symbolic forms. These modes allow students to express ideas that may not yet be fully formed in words and help them encounter multiple perspectives with care.
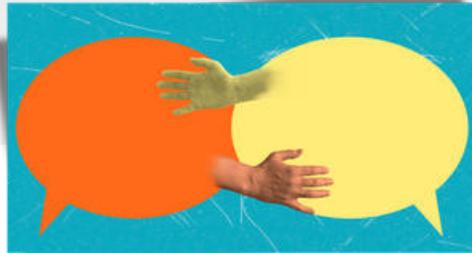
Holistic learning

Holistic learning recognises that understanding develops through the integration of thinking, feeling, sensing, imagining, and relating. In secondary education, this principle supports young people in working with complexity, ambiguity and emotion as part of learning.

Holistic learning includes embodied and sensory dimensions, not as performance, but as everyday ways of noticing and making meaning. These dimensions help students connect ideas to lived experience and deepen engagement across subjects.

Relational well-being

Relational well-being refers to the quality of relationships within the learning environment. AELD requires spaces where students feel recognised, respected, and safe to participate at their own pace.

In secondary classrooms and other secondary settings, relational well being is supported through attentiveness to group dynamics, emotional atmosphere, and the ways everyone (students and educators) relates to one another. It is co-created through everyday interactions rather than relying on rules.

These principles are most powerful when experienced in combination. For example, an educational session may involve:

- an invitation to decide the topic for exploration, to enhance power-sharing
- a brief embodied invitation to encourage transforming dialogue
- a choice of modalities to enhance opportunities for holistic learning
- a reflective pause to support relational well-being.

AELD offers simple, adaptable ways to integrate these principles into everyday teaching — supporting young people to experience democracy not as a distant ideal but as something they practise with one another, moment by moment.

5. Democratic sensibility in secondary education

Democratic sensibility refers to the ways of noticing, feeling and responding that develop when students engage in learning for democracy with a particular focus on democratic values and principles. It is not something that can be taught directly or measured through outcomes. Rather, it emerges gradually through lived experiences of participation, dialogue, and shared responsibility, and through actively noticing, expressing, listening, responding, and reflecting together.

In secondary education, democratic sensibility involves young people becoming aware of these experiences and aware of themselves as part of a wider collective. It involves recognising others' presence, noticing how one's actions affect the group, and responding with attentiveness and care. These capacities develop through everyday interactions in the classroom and other learning spaces, which consciously draw on AELD values, principles, and practices, rather than through instruction alone.

Democratic sensibility as lived experience
Democratic sensibility is embodied, relational, and grounded in experience. It is closely connected to young people's growing ability
- to reflect on:
    multiple perspectives
    emotional and relational dynamics
    complexity and ambiguity
    their own role within shared learning situations

- to notice:
    the atmosphere in the room
    the tone of interactions
    moments of tension or ease
    shifts in energy or attention

Through these experiences, students begin to sense when a space feels inclusive, when participation feels possible, and when responsiveness is needed. This awareness supports more thoughtful engagement with others and with learning.

A growing awareness of oneself in relation to others
Young people notice how their choices, expressions, and actions influence shared work and relationships. They begin to recognise moments of alignment and tension, and to reflect on how learning feels in their bodies and emotions.

Sensitivity to fairness, voice, and inclusion
Young people often detect inequities quickly. Democratic sensibility develops when they experience environments where each voice is welcomed and differences are treated with respect.

Recognition of emotions as part of democratic life
Emotions influence how students participate, listen, or withdraw. When young people are encouraged to notice and reflect on emotional experience without judgement, they learn that feelings shape democratic interactions.

Openness to multiple perspectives
Democratic sensibility is cultivated when young people encounter diverse viewpoints and practise curiosity rather than defensiveness. AELD helps students approach difference through feeling and shared embodied experience rather than solely through cognitive debate.

A sense of shared responsibility for the learning environment
When young people understand that the tone, rhythm, and quality of interactions belong to everyone — not only to the teacher — democratic sensibility deepens. Students begin to participate in shaping the space.

Noticing relational cues and adjusting with care
Responsiveness is a core democratic value. Democratic sensibility develops when young people learn to attune to others' cues — verbal and non-verbal — and adjust their actions.

How teachers can support democratic sensibility

Democratic sensibility develops over time as young people:

- experience different forms of participation
- engage in multimodal dialogue
- encounter differences and disagreements
- reflect on how learning unfolds collectively

Teachers support this development by creating conditions where students feel recognised, where multiple forms of expression are valued, and where reflection is woven into everyday practice. Democratic sensibility grows through supportive conditions which involve, for example:

- inviting multimodal modes of expression and communication so students can enter learning in ways that best allow them to engage with and express their ideas, thoughts and feelings
- using simple embodied practices to open awareness of self and others
- creating space for reflective pauses to notice emotions, relational cues, and connection patterns
- offering meaningful but manageable decision points to practise shared responsibility
- responding with the acceptive gaze, recognising contributions before evaluating them
- allowing time for insights to emerge, recognising that AELD is not linear

During adolescence, democratic sensibility is shaped in contexts where difference, visibility, and belonging are highly charged. Students may experience inclusion or exclusion along lines of gender, class, racial or ethnic identity, expression, confidence, or conformity. AELD attends to these dynamics by creating spaces where students can sense fairness and care not only in what is said, but in how participation is paced, recognised, and shared. By integrating simple, flexible practices, teachers can help students encounter democracy as something they live now, not only something they study for the future.

6. Responsive pedagogy in secondary education

Responsive pedagogy, as part of AELD, is not a fixed method but a relational and embodied stance that develops through attentiveness and reflection. In secondary education, it supports young people in navigating complexity, difference, and uncertainty by creating learning spaces that can adjust to emerging needs, rhythms, and interactions, as well as factors such as gender, class, and racial or ethnic identity.

Attending to students and to oneself
Responsive pedagogy involves attentiveness to students' verbal, emotional, relational, and embodied cues. At the same time, it includes teachers' awareness of their own bodily and emotional responses.

Teachers may notice:
- tension or relaxation in their own posture
- changes in tone or pace
- impulses to speed up, correct, or control
- moments of uncertainty or hesitation

By recognising these responses, teachers can make more conscious choices about how to respond to students and the group.

Responding with care and flexibility

Responsiveness involves adjusting teaching in small, thoughtful ways. This may include:

- slowing down when the group feels overwhelmed
- pausing when emotions surface
- offering alternative modes of participation when the proposed one is not suitable
- changing the structure of an activity when needed
- allowing space for reflection

These adjustments are not signs of loss of control. They are expressions of pedagogical care and democratic attentiveness.

Responsive pedagogy as reflective practice

Responsive pedagogy is supported through ongoing reflection. Teachers reflect not only on what students do, but also on:

- how the learning space felt
- how they themselves responded
- what supported or limited participation
- what might be adjusted next time

This reflective dimension helps teachers remain open, responsive, and ethically grounded in their practice.

Teacher practices supporting responsive pedagogy

In secondary classrooms, responsive pedagogy may involve:

- offering opt-in participation and observation
- inviting students to choose from multimodal modes of expression and communication
- naming uncertainty as part of learning
- embodying calm presence during moments of tension
- acknowledging when plans need to change

Through these practices, teachers support education for democracy as an ongoing, relational process.

Attending to presence

Responsiveness begins with noticing how students arrive — emotionally, physically, and socially. Young people often communicate readiness or hesitation through posture, silence, tone, or energy.

Creating space for multiple modes of expression

Responsiveness includes offering different ways for students to participate — especially for those who may not feel comfortable speaking first or who prefer to think through creative or embodied means.

Adjusting to rhythms and needs

Young people participate in different ways at different times. Responsive pedagogy adapts to these shifts by noticing the tone of the room and responding with flexibility.

Supporting relational safety

Democratic learning requires environments where students feel able to take risks, share unfinished or tentative thoughts and engage with difference. Responsiveness includes noticing when feelings of safety are under threat and taking steps in response.

Responding to the unexpected

AELD encourages openness to unplanned moments that hold potential for learning. Responsive pedagogy treats these moments as invitations rather than disruptions.

What this can look like:
- Exploring further, a surprising insight or creative response.
- Allowing time for a spontaneous, meaningful discussion.
- Adjusting a task when students propose a new direction.

Modelling responsiveness as a democratic stance

Young people learn responsiveness by experiencing it. When educators listen with openness, acknowledge uncertainty, and adjust thoughtfully, they embody ways of being grounded in democratic relationships — relationships grounded in recognition and care.

What this can look like:
- Admitting when something is unclear and exploring it together.
- Showing curiosity toward student ideas, even when they diverge from the plan.
- Practising the acceptive gaze — seeing and acknowledging contributions before evaluating them.

Why responsive pedagogy matters for democracy

Responsive pedagogy helps young people experience democratic life as something relational, shared and evolving.

Through responsiveness, students learn that:
- their presence influences the group
- listening and noticing are forms of participation
- temotions and bodily cues matter in democratic interactions
- disagreement can be navigated with care
- learning for democracy is an ongoing process of becoming

7. The acceptive gaze in secondary education

The acceptive gaze refers to a way of seeing, receiving and responding to learners and oneself that prioritises recognition before evaluation. It applies to how educators view learners, and themselves, and also to how learners view each other and educators. It is a core pedagogical stance for AELD, which involves those in educational encounters seeing each other without jumping to conclusions or judgement. When an educator embodies the acceptive gaze over time, students are more likely to come to recognise they are being seen, heard and acknowledged as they are. The teacher invites students to view their own and others' responses with the acceptive gaze to make it easier to face the emotions that embodied methods can evoke. This invitation is part of the co-creation of a safe-enough learning environment for AELD.

The acceptive gaze is not only a way of thinking; it is an embodied action. It becomes visible through:
- the look a person gives
- posture and orientation
- tone of voice
- pacing and pauses
- the willingness to stay with uncertainty

Through these embodied cues, teachers (and others, in group work, for example) communicate: "I am here, I am listening, and your contribution matters".

In secondary education, where students navigate identity, vulnerability, and social exposure, the acceptive gaze plays a crucial role in creating learning environments where participation feels possible. The acceptive gaze helps cultivate the conditions in which democratic values and principles can be experienced. It supports the creation of conditions in which:
- participation becomes less risky
- students feel recognised without being exposed
- diverse forms of expression are welcomed
- learning becomes a shared, relational process

It helps teachers and students learn to:
- recognise contributions before evaluating them
- meet uncertainty with openness rather than pressure
- allow ideas to remain unfinished
- acknowledge presence without demanding disclosure

Embodying the acceptive gaze

The teacher and students may embody an acceptive gaze, rooting it in an approach that conveys attentiveness and acceptance. As an attitude, which is attentive and accepting, it may give rise to practices such as:

- acknowledging students' contributions before evaluating them
- naming partial or tentative ideas as valuable
- responding to differences with curiosity rather than judgement
- explicitly inviting students to listen and notice before responding

It is also possible in some activities, where appropriate, for the idea of the acceptive gaze to be introduced and discussed, helping to raise awareness of what it involves and its value.

The teacher's acceptive gaze towards themselves

An important dimension of the acceptive gaze is how teachers relate to their own responses. This includes:

- recognising moments of uncertainty or not-knowing
- noticing impulses to correct or control
- allowing oneself to pause or reconsider

By practising the acceptive gaze towards themselves, teachers embody a democratic stance that values openness, reflection and learning-in-process.

The acceptive gaze between students

The acceptive gaze is also a way of seeing among students, which is important for how students engage in AELD. Teachers can support students in adopting an acceptive gaze by:

- encouraging students to view each other with attentiveness
- teaching to recognise one's judgemental thoughts and aiming the acceptive gaze towards one's bodily responses (e.g. emotional reactions)
- inviting descriptive responses before opinions
- supporting peer feedback that begins with noticing rather than judging

8. The potential for democratic transformations through AELD

When AELD is applied in practice, democratic transformation rarely takes the form of a single change linked to one key element (see Table 1). The Latvian secondary-school trials illustrate this well: AELD more often generates 'bundles' of shifts across several elements simultaneously. Because the trials involved students, teachers, and school principals, multiple interaction channels and forms of co-creation emerged: student–student, student–teacher, teacher–principal, student–principal, and student–teacher–principal. Therefore, to trace these democratic transformations through AELD, we consider illustrative episodes from three interaction channels.

Student–student: When reflecting on the new qualities they noticed or discovered in their peers when applying drama sketch and collage, students reported that their classmates were unexpectedly more active, effective, and creative than usual, and that new talents had emerged. They particularly valued their peers' helpful, friendly, and collaborative behaviour. A student interview offers a compelling illustration of this process:

> "We had to create a drama sketch about how democracy was understood in the Soviet past. At first, I was terrified — no ideas came to mind. My worries deepened when I was paired with a classmate I'd never worked with; honestly, I assumed they would be a bore — quiet and not very talkative. I couldn't imagine them stepping forward and improvising, given how introverted they seemed.
>
> I was completely wrong. They have a great sense of humour and real artistic talent. They're smart, too. As we worked out the plot, they kept offering ideas that amazed me — they're well-read, with a sharp, sophisticated mind. They also took on the hardest role without hesitation when they saw how lost I looked.
>
> Judging by the applause, everyone in the class loved our improvisation. That episode completely changed my view of them. I'd gladly work with them again. And one more thing: after the sketch, it struck me how often we form groundless opinions about people because of hasty conclusions — and how often our judgements turn out to be wrong."
>
> AECED Case 11: Secondary Education, Daugavpils State Gymnasium, Latvia

This episode demonstrates how an AELD activity, combined with the principles of responsive pedagogy formulated at the outset of the AECED trials, can cultivate the **acceptive gaze**: initial judgement gives way to attentive noticing of what emerges in the other. The student begins with a fixed, judgemental story ("I assumed they would be a bore — introverted and not very talkative") and then, through a shared task and aesthetic-embodied experience, shifts toward open, curious, evidence-based noticing ("I was completely wrong — new talents emerged, and I'd gladly work with them again"). Their closing reflection captures the heart of the acceptive gaze in everyday language: "We often form groundless opinions, we jump to conclusions, and our judgements are frequently wrong".

This shift is also supported by **relational well-being** (one of the democratic principles) fostered through AELD. The episode describes a change in the quality of relationships, characterised by feelings of support, collaboration, trust, warmth, and a renewed willingness to work together — reflecting "connectedness and positive feelings of involvement through participation" (see the definition of relational well-being in Table 1).

At the same time, the process activates a core democratic value: **responsiveness**. The student's peer notices that they are lost and responds by taking on the most challenging role and contributing ideas — responsiveness as attentiveness to another's needs in the moment.

Finally, the vignette also suggests an increase in **democratic sensibility**. The student's "felt" learning ("that episode changed my view... it struck me...") points to democracy not as an abstract theory but as a lived shift in how one meets and recognises others.

Overall, the effects of AELD are not mono-dimensional but multi-dimensional and interrelated. Through the learning process, participants can begin to engage with democracy-as-becoming, embody democratic values, strengthen democratic sensibility, and cultivate the acceptive gaze.

Student–teacher: When students worked in mixed groups with educators, they reported a noticeable shift in the quality of the encounter. Teachers were experienced less as facilitators of a pre-structured learning sequence and more as responsive co-participants in a shared learning process:

> "Today, our teachers were more emotional than usual. They spoke about things that mattered to both them and us, so it wasn't just a formal interaction but a conversation we could easily enter. They could "read the moment" and adapt to the class and context. We were surprised that teachers could laugh and be open, and that we could co-create something meaningful. They noticed where our ideas were heading, slowed down, and let us lead the next step. In today's activities, we experienced democracy: teachers worked with us rather than simply listened to us".
>
> AECED Case 13: Intergenerational Learning, Riga Secondary School No. 22, Latvia

This demonstrates how AELD can activate **responsive pedagogy** in practice. The teachers' "reading of the moment," emotional presence, and willingness to slow down indicate an attentiveness to the group's emerging ideas and rhythms, and a capacity to adapt the learning process accordingly. What students emphasise is not only what teachers did, but how teachers were present: open, human, and relational — creating a learning space that students could "easily enter".

At the same time, the episode illustrates **power-sharing** in practice. Students distinguish between teachers who simply "listen" and teachers who "work with us". The key moment comes when teachers "let us lead the next step," showing a shift from students merely responding to students helping shape the direction of the shared work. Here, power-sharing does not mean teachers stepping back completely; it means creating and holding a space where students' ideas can genuinely influence what happens next.

These shifts are closely linked to **transforming dialogue**. Students describe a transition from a formal exchange to a conversation they can easily join and contribute to. Teachers' openness ("they could laugh and be open") helped lower barriers, widen participation, and allow ideas to develop as the activity unfolded.

The students' reflection also suggests stronger relational **well-being.** The interaction feels more respectful and safer, so students can participate at their own pace. In this way, AELD does more than introduce new methods — it improves the relational conditions for learning, strengthening connectedness and positive involvement through participation (see Table 1).

Finally, students explicitly frame the experience as democracy lived in the present: "In today's activities, we experienced democracy". This statement resonates strongly with the vision of **democracy-as-becoming** — democracy understood not as an abstract political system, but as an ongoing process continually created through everyday interactions, choices, and relationships. In this episode, democracy is enacted through responsiveness, shared agency, and co-creation.

Principal–student: The principal of one AECED trial school in Latvia said that embodied activities can reduce social distance, support more equal relationships, and even challenge traditional roles. They illustrated this with an example. In Latvian, 'you' has two forms: 'tu' (informal 'you', for addressing friends, peers, or younger people) and 'jūs' (formal 'you', for addressing teachers, elders, or strangers). They recalled:

> "On a field trip with one class, we were climbing toward a mountain village when a student suddenly switched from 'jūs' to 'tu', asking, 'Vai tev sāp?" ("Is the climb painful for you?") while helping me up. Using 'tev' – the dative ('to you') form of 'tu' felt like an authentic response to the physically demanding moment and our shared experience. The atmosphere had become less formal, and the distance between us narrowed. It felt like we were speaking as friends for a moment. But once we came back down and the physical challenge was over, the student returned to 'jūs'.
>
> AECED Case 12: Adult/professional and organisational learning, Jūrmala State Gymnasium, Latvia.

This episode demonstrates how embodied activities, central to AELD, can foster **responsiveness** as attentiveness to another's needs in the moment. Here, the student notices the adult's physical strain, asks, "Is the climb painful for you?", and helps them continue the ascent. Importantly, the student's response is not only verbal but relational. By choosing 'tu', they do more than ask a question — they briefly meet the adult as a fellow person in a shared physical challenge. In terms of Table 1, responsiveness encompasses both interpersonal care and practical support, as well as embodied sensitivity to what the situation evokes.

At the same time, the temporary shift to 'tu' suggests **equality and equity**, as well as **relational well-being**: the status gap narrows, warmth and connectedness grow, and the encounter becomes easier and more humane. Because the student later returns to 'jūs', the episode also captures **democracy-as-becoming** — democracy as something situational, emerging and receding with context rather than permanently replacing roles. The less formal tone indicates a shift in dialogue, while the student's ability to shape the interaction in the moment points to micro-level **power-sharing.** Finally, the teacher's non-judgemental way of taking 'tu' reflects the **acceptive gaze**, and the student's context-sensitive care signals **democratic sensibility** — a felt capacity to meet authority more democratically when circumstances call for it.

Thus, AELD may be associated with multiple democratic shifts rather than a single, isolated change. It can serve as a catalyst for democratic transformations across the classroom environment, shaping how both students and teachers relate to one another, participate, and learn. Through aesthetic and embodied participation, AELD activates democratic values — responsiveness, freedom, and equality and equity — and makes democratic principles visible in practice: power-sharing as students help shape what happens next, transforming dialogue as interaction becomes more open and engaging, and relational well-being as participants feel recognised and safe to participate at their own pace, and holistic learning as meaning is created through the whole person — thinking, feeling, imagination, and bodily experience rather than cognition alone. Together, these shifts strengthen democratic sensibility and cultivate the acceptive gaze in the learning community, supporting democracy-as-becoming as something practised and renewed through listening, responding, shared agency, and co-creation.

9. Teacher reflection and professional identity

Using or extending AELD is not simply a technical process for educators in secondary education to implement. It can stimulate reflection on the values and purposes of education and be a developmental experience for educators. In this section we give an insight from our research into what the experience of engaging with the ideas of AELD and developing an AELD lesson activity for students meant for one secondary teacher who works in a school in England

AELD is grounded in democratic values and principles. These have been summarised in Table 1 and are discussed in greater detail in the Framework. Developing AELD can evoke responses and feelings among educators about democracy, democratic values and principles, and how these relate to education. It can lead them to question the values that inform their practice and professional identity, and to reflect critically on them. The policy and cultural contexts of secondary education settings vary. These contexts are likely to affect the opportunities and constraints regarding education for democracy, generally and AELD, as well as teachers' practice and identity. Engaging with the ideas and possibilities of AELD for students invites reflection on teachers' practice and identity. For example, the democratic value of responsiveness concerns attentiveness to others' needs, voices, experiences and to one's bodily resonances (emotions, sensations and thoughts): this value of responsiveness is as relevant to the teacher as it is to students. As a teacher considers the democratic principles of power-sharing and transformative dialogue, this can stimulate reflection on current practice and expectations in their educational setting.

The vignette below provides an insight into what AELD meant for a secondary teacher in one of the participatory action research cases in the AECED research. Based on the research data generated, the vignette presents the story of a teacher engaging with AELD and its values and principles. It involves both a change in pedagogical practice that the teacher developed and a reconnection with a professional identity that better aligns with their values and feelings about the purpose of education.

One teacher's engagement with AELD

This story is based on research encounters with an experienced secondary teacher in England. The story is constructed using the teacher's voice, wherever possible, and is offered as an illustration of how they engaged with the principles and practices of aesthetic-embodied learning for democracy, in a lesson with their students and, more broadly, as a way to reflect on their professional identity.

The teacher planned a lesson as an attempt to trial and experience aesthetic-embodied learning for democracy (AELD) with one particular class. This was a one-off lesson, and the activity lasted about 50 minutes. Students were invited to create a collage using a range of arts and crafts materials, with a paper plate as the 'canvas'. The teacher invited students to express their understanding of a key topic, offering them the opportunity to make meaning of their prior learning in advance of a more formal assessment in the following term. Students were given the choice to work on their own or with others and to represent their learning visually. They were also encouraged to share the meaning of their collages with others. The teacher was acting more as a facilitator in this lesson, affording students an unusual level of autonomy and creative freedom.

The first person is used here to give a feel for how the teacher enacted the lesson. The story is based on the teacher's accounts, their reflections through arts-based and embodied activities and teacher-researcher dialogue during the participatory action research trial. The story is designed to offer insight into what the teacher and students did, how they responded to the activity, and reflections on the AELD process.

It may help to imagine the teacher speaking aloud to a colleague or friend.

'I've got my students to be a little bit creative... I gave them a whole table of stuff and just gave them one word, linked to what we've been learning. I invited them to interpret it as they wish.

And it was really nice, for three reasons.

It reminded me of how I used to teach, when it felt like we had the time and space. But we don't seem to allow the time and space for lessons like this anymore.

I enjoyed it because I didn't feel that I was in charge, I mean, obviously I was, but it didn't feel that way. I was sitting down with them, talking with them.

I got the impression they've not had this freedom or opportunity for a long time; I gave them a choice, I didn't make them do it.

I actually felt joy for about 50 minutes. I pretty much left them alone for about 15–20 minutes and then started to mingle, asking them to share what this might mean and why you have done this, explain to me why this is important, that kind of thing. Most of them were hugely creative, and I really enjoyed it, and they had a really nice time, too.

And although they were all just given the one word to respond to, their responses were all so different. I could tell some weren't used to having that autonomy to decide. Some said they didn't know what I wanted them to do, or that they didn't know the answer. Maybe they're not used to being invited to do whatever they want?

I didn't feel that ability was a barrier, and some of the students who tend to struggle with writing or self-control were much more self-regulated. And they even helped with the tidying up afterwards! What they created was all so different, but none was better than the other. Some students worked on their own, others chose to work in groups, but I didn't dictate who they should work with.

It was an opportunity for them to test out their ability to think, to compromise and negotiate and work with others, and I'm not sure they're used to that. And afterwards, they were pretty complimentary of others in the class; they had the opportunity to just be nice to each other and celebrate what each had done. And even though it was a very different kind of lesson for them, they all met the success criteria. I don't think they experience that very often.

I bet it was one of those lessons where they think they're not doing a lot of thinking, but they actually were… and being creative. They worked blooming hard!

I was slightly nervous at times, because someone [for example, a senior school leader] could have come in and questioned what I was doing, but I had linked it to the scheme of work and the final assessment, so that was my safety net.'

In addition to narrating how this lesson had evolved, the teacher was invited [by the researcher] to engage in an aesthetic and embodied way to reflect on the process of engaging with AELD. The teacher chose to create a series of collages using their own materials. What emerged went way beyond a reflection on the lesson and the students' responses; it was a deep and rich reflection by the teacher on their professional identity. The collages created show how the teacher was starting to embed the dimensions of AELD into their practice and how they think about their practice — referring directly to relational well-being and power-sharing, and implicitly to transforming dialogue.

Let's pick up the teacher's narration again and conclude with this reflection.

'I really felt like I was building up a relationship with the students, that relational well-being we've talked about. And ultimately, I was in power without having to be powerful. I mean, I'm the adult, and I have a responsibility, but it doesn't mean that I'm exerting power.

I've realised that the kind of teacher I would like to be has been hiding under a whole load of nonsense. I'm reminded now of the teacher that I can be. I've got a sense of who I would actually like to be, who I probably am, but would like to be more of if I wasn't so cautious about being caught out.

And I've thought about the teacher I have to be and how rigid that feels. I'm more aware of the non-democratic bits of my work. There are drivers behind the person I have to be, and so much rigidity. But I want to be a sparkly, colourful teacher, and I have been in the past. And yet I find I'm living in a system that I don't really agree with.

I feel so stifled, I'm not as able to make those free decisions as I perhaps would want to. And maybe students aren't able to, either. Students just get told how to answer a question to get the most marks. That's not about flair and creativity. So what we're doing is creating people who aren't free to think for themselves or who know how to problem-solve.

When did we last ask them what they thought? We teach them about values and democracy, but we don't really allow them to experience it or demonstrate it. And because they don't experience it, maybe they don't believe in it...

They don't know the power of their own voice, I suppose. And when they were mingling around in the room and having choice and freedom, sharing the power in the room, maybe they didn't even recognise that as having democratic freedom. But they have now had the chance to experience that.'

AECED Case 19: UK — Secondary Education.

10. Designing AELD environments

AELD environments are not special rooms or set-ups; they are ways of holding space that, in everyday teaching, create opportunities for learners and educators to connect with the values, principles and possibilities of democracy, the human qualities that make democracy possible and the power of relating with others.

Some of the key features of AELD environments, with examples of what they may look like in classrooms and other settings in secondary education, are shared here:

Emotional and relational safety
Emotional and relational safety is a foundational condition for AELD. It is particularly important for students who may feel exposed or marginalised due to gendered, class-based, or racialised expectations or social positioning, for example.

In secondary education, where students are often sensitive to exposure, judgement, and peer dynamics, feelings of safety are essential for participation, exploration, and shared meaning-making.

In AELD, safety is not guaranteed in advance or enforced by rules. It is co created through everyday interactions, pedagogical choices and embodied ways of being together.

Emotional and relational safety emerges through and is shaped by:
- how students are received
- how differences are handled
- how uncertainty is held
- tone of voice
- pacing and pauses
- bodily orientation and proximity
- opportunities to observe rather than participate
- the availability of multiple modes of expression

The acceptive gaze plays an important role in creating emotional and relational safety. Safety can be strengthened when participation is clearly optional and when respecting boundaries allows students to engage at a pace that feels manageable. In AELD:

- students choose how and whether to participate
- observing is recognised as a valid form of engagement
- sharing personal experiences is never required
- students may shift between modes of participation

AELD does not eliminate tension or disagreement. Instead, emotional and relational safety allows tension to be held with care. Teachers can support this by:

- slowing down when emotions surface
- naming moments of difficulty without judgement
- pausing activities when needed
- re-centring attention on shared presence

Through these practices, students learn that difference and uncertainty can be part of learning without threatening their sense of belonging.

Emotional and relational safety is co-created by teachers and students together. Over time, students learn to:

- respond to one another with attentiveness
- practice the acceptive gaze in peer interactions
- notice how their actions affect the group
- contribute to a respectful learning culture

In the next two sections, illustrative episodes, based on the AECED research, bring to life some of the experience and complexity that can characterise AELD in secondary schools.

Multiple pathways into learning

AELD environments make participation accessible by offering multiple engagement modalities. This supports equity and acknowledges the diverse ways young people make meaning.

What this can look like:
- including drawing, movement, writing, mapping, object arrangement, or sound as options
- using images or materials to spark dialogue
- allowing students to choose how to express initial ideas before moving to discussion
- recognising quiet reflection as a legitimate form of participation

Flexible structures that support power-sharing

AELD environments offer manageable opportunities for students to influence aspects of learning. Young people develop agency when they see their contributions shaping the process.

What this can look like:
- letting students suggest questions, themes, or directions within a task
- sharing small decisions (e.g., grouping, sequencing, or presentation format)
- providing alternatives within activities to support autonomy

Space for imagination and symbolic work

Young people often understand complex ideas through images, metaphors, and symbolic forms. AELD environments invite creative meaning-making as a pathway to democratic understanding.

What this can look like:
- using metaphor, gesture or tableaux (when students create a still picture, without talking, to express a concept) to explore abstract themes
- creating visual or material representations to examine tensions or dilemmas
- encouraging students to use imagination to consider alternative perspectives

Respect for pace and privacy

Not all students are ready for the same level of openness at the same time. Respecting pace acknowledges personal boundaries and supports relational well-being.

What this can look like:
- allowing students to observe ("witness") an activity before participating.
- offering private reflection journals or drawing time
- using tiered invitations (individual ➛ pair ➛ group) to support gradual involvement

Adaptability to constraints

Secondary classrooms and other learning spaces often operate under conditions of limited time, large class sizes, diverse needs, and high-stakes exam pressures. AELD environments adapt flexibly to these realities.

What this can look like:
- using short (5–10 minute) activities as entry points
- offering structures that work with large classes (e.g., group rotation, stations, small clusters)
- providing alternatives for online or camera-off settings (gesture prompts, chat responses, object work)
- enfolding AELD practices into existing lessons rather than adding separate tasks
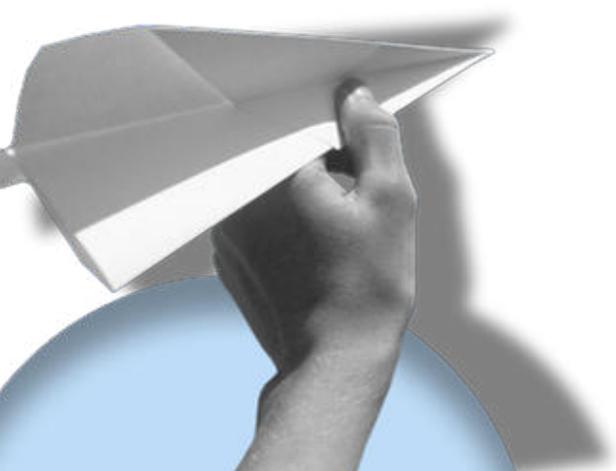
Creating AELD environments

AELD environments can be woven together through subtle, pedagogical choices rather than major redesigns. When emotional safety, multimodal access, flexibility, attunement, imagination, and shared responsibility come together, young people can experience democratic values and relationships in action and be offered ways to reflect on and cultivate awareness of what these values and relationships mean to them.

In secondary education — where classrooms and other learning spaces are busy, diverse, and shaped by time constraints — AELD environments can be created through small, intentional choices that make learning more open, relational, and responsive, and that include opportunities for reflection and cultivating awareness. These environments can create conditions where young people feel safe to participate, where multiple modes of expression are welcomed and where shared meaning-making becomes possible. They help young people come to feel and understand democracy as something that is:

- lived in relationships
- shaped by everyday gestures
- enriched by difference
- strengthened through responsiveness
- in a process of continually becoming

In some circumstances, educators, policy actors, students, and others may believe that new programmes, revised curricula, or changes to school structures are required to promote AELD. However, this is not necessarily a requirement for introducing, sustaining, or extending AELD.

Crucially for AELD environments, they offer participants opportunities not only to experience democratic values and relationships in action, but also to reflect on and cultivate awareness of what they mean to them through multiple modes of expression, including aesthetic and embodied pedagogical activities. Such environments are then spaces which support education for democracy.

11. Everyday practices for secondary education

Building on what's been said about AELD environments, this section outlines practices that support education for democracy and can be integrated into existing lessons or other educational activities. These practices are not a fixed programme or sequence of activities. Instead, they offer flexible pathways that teachers may draw on selectively, adapting them to their subject, context, and students.

The practices described below are organised into broad categories. Each category represents a type of pedagogical invitation, rather than a set of prescribed activities. Teachers may choose one practice, combine elements from different categories or use them occasionally as needed.

Arriving practices that support students in settling into the learning space and becoming present to themselves, others, and the task at hand.

Warm-up practices that gently activate curiosity and attention, preparing students to engage with ideas, materials, or dialogue.

Collaborative meaning-making practices that invite students to explore concepts and questions through multiple modes of expression, supporting deeper understanding and perspective-taking.

Dialogue and reflection practices that create space for students to notice, articulate, and respond to their own learning and to others' contributions.

Power-sharing practices that offer manageable opportunities for students to influence aspects of the learning process, supporting agency and shared responsibility.

Ritual practices that provide brief, contained moments of opening or closure that support connection, transition, or collective pause.

Longer inquiry pathways that support sustained exploration over a lesson or series of lessons, allowing students to work with complexity, uncertainty, and shared meaning-making over time.

AELD practices are designed to be modular and adaptable. They may be used independently, repeated over time, or combined in different ways. Teachers are encouraged to select practices that feel appropriate and manageable for their context.

12. Invitations to reflect

The aim of this Guide is to support awareness of and interest in how the key ideas underpinning AELD, outlined in Table 1, can become part of teaching practice and learning for democracy. In this section, educators and others are invited to spend time reflecting, and suggestions are offered on how to do so.

Three activities designed to encourage reflection are presented. Reflections 1 and 2 support educators in thinking imaginatively and in attending to their feelings and responses to the idea of AELD. Reflection 3 focuses on noticing whether, how, and to what extent democratic values and principles emerge in classroom practice and other learning spaces. It supports educators in attuning to students' rhythms, recognising subtle forms of participation, and cultivating environments in which young people can engage in democratic life with openness, agency, and care.
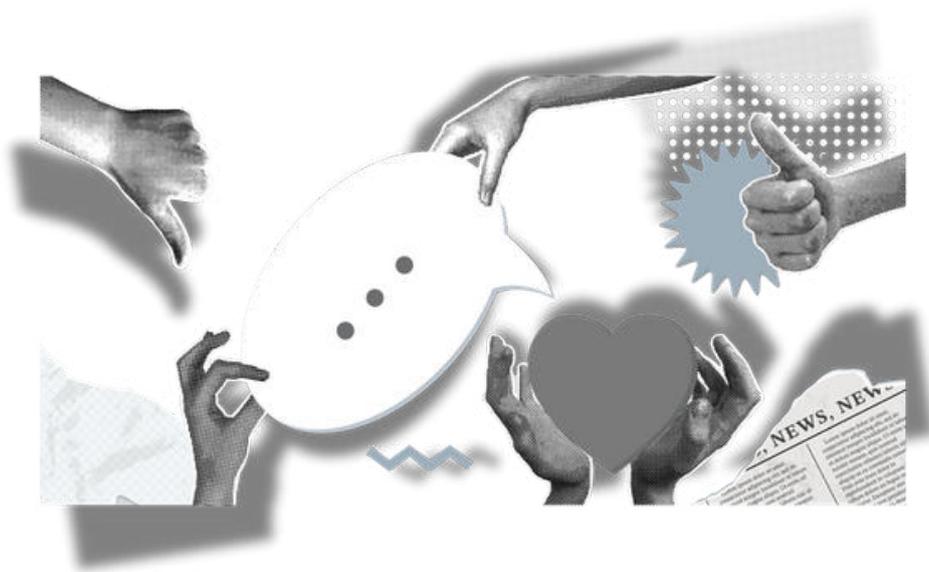
Reflection 1: Thinking and moving

This is an invitation to reflect through physical movement. This could be moving around a space, or just a small movement or gesture with your hands, shoulders, or head. As you gesture or move, think about your everyday practice in relation to AELD. You may wish to use some of the prompts below:

- How does AELD fit within your practice?
- Where does AELD feature in your practice?
- How would AELD appear within your practice, and how might AELD be experienced by you and your students?
- What are the challenges for practising AELD, and how might you overcome these challenges?
- What are your hopes and your aspirations for AELD?

Think of areas of your teaching practice that you can imagine doing differently. Allow your mind to meander through these thoughts as you move.

Reflection 2: Reflective Mapping

Having looked through the Guide, map out ideas for how you connect AELD with your teaching practice. For example, you might like to visualise these connections like a geographical map, or a mind-map, you might use words or icons, or you might like to use sticky notes and string to make connections. Allow your thoughts to flow freely and once complete consider:

- How does this mapping give rise to ideas that allow you to think about the possibilities of teaching differently?

Is there an area of practice that you would like to explore further, as an individual, or collectively, if you are working with others.

Reflection 3: Reflecting on an AELD Lesson using Collage creation

Following an AELD lesson, you could carry out a collage reflection activity. You will need a large piece of paper, and access to materials of assorted colours and textures; for example, arts and crafts materials, magazine cuttings, found materials, stationery items such as paper clips, paper, pens, sticky notes, stickers, buttons, ribbon. Arrange these materials to create a collage and stimulate your reflection in response to a prompt, either one you set yourself or the example below:
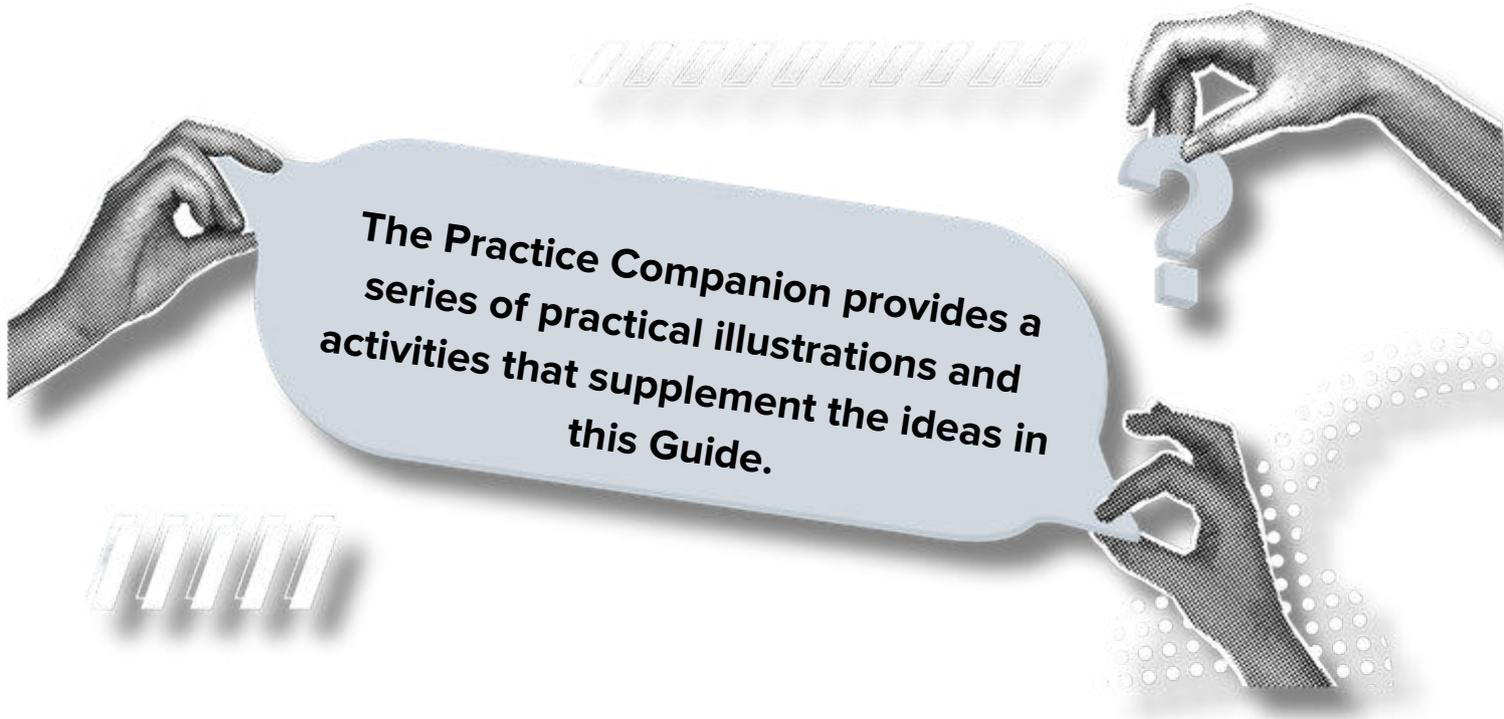
- Having practised AELD, what did you notice about one or more of the following: the classroom atmosphere, participation, freedom, responsiveness, power-sharing, the acceptive gaze, multimodal learning?
- When you have finished your collage, you could discuss the process and ideas with someone else or record yourself describing your collage and what the different elements represent.

Looking ahead, ask:

- What is one small AELD practice I might try or continue next time?
- What did I learn about my class today?
- What did I learn about my own relational or pedagogical stance?
- What is emerging for me as I continue exploring AELD?

13. An invitation to explore the Practice Companion

The Practice Companion provides a series of practical illustrations and activities that supplement the ideas in this Guide.

There are five parts in the Practice Companion, each relating, in turn, to the sections above on democratic values, democratic principles, democratic sensibility, responsive pedagogy, and the acceptive gaze.

You are invited to explore the practical illustrations and activities — choosing what resonates, adapting what you need, and returning to them as your practice evolves.