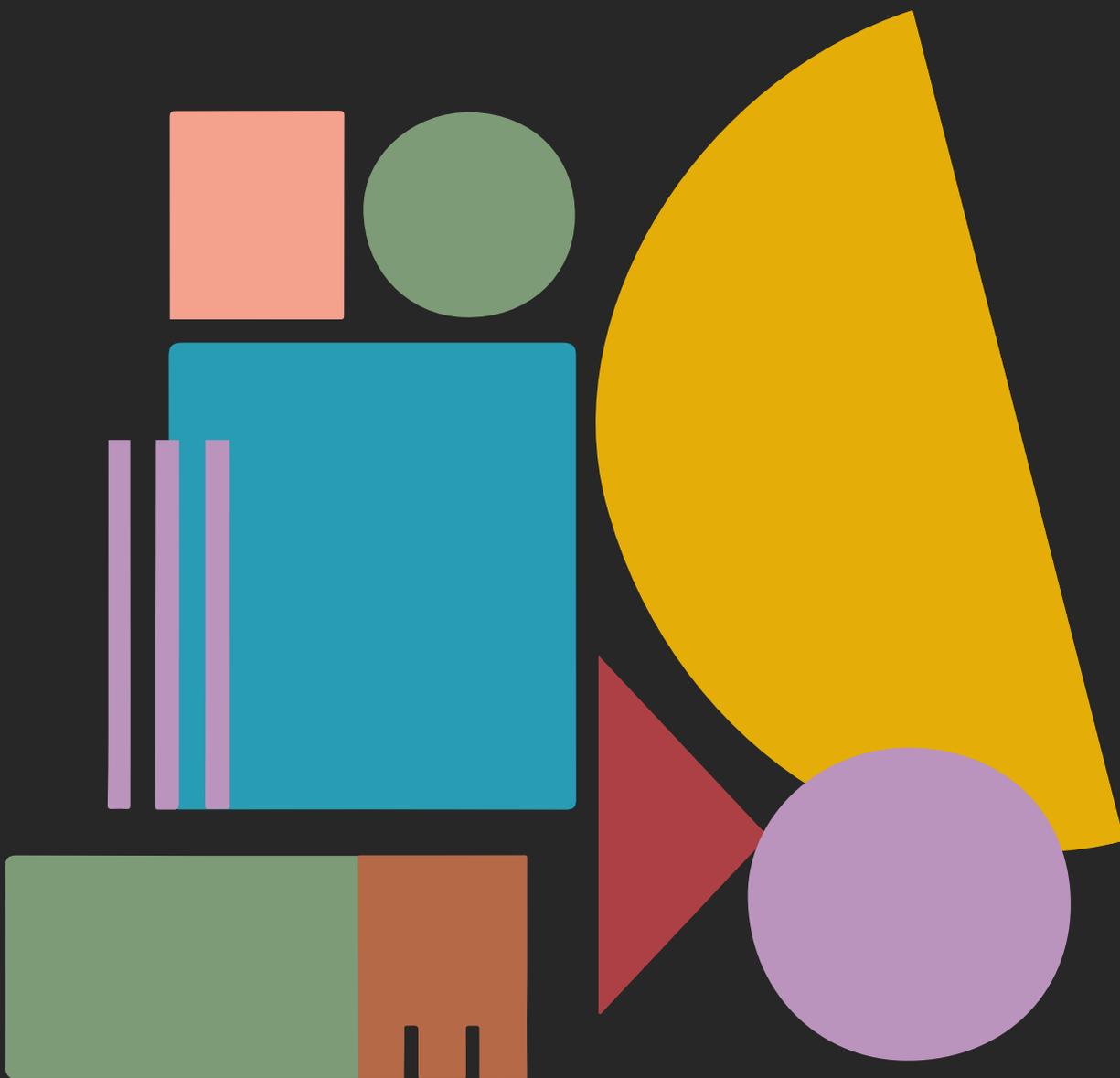
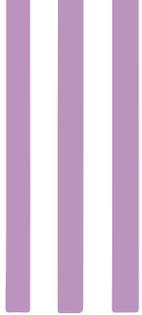


PRACTICE COMPANION: LIVING DEMOCRACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A guide to educational activities and
pathways for practice in aesthetic and
embodied learning for democracy (AELD)





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Practice companion: Living democracy in higher education: A guide to educational activities and pathways for practice in aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD)

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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 Practice Companion presents a range of educational activities and pathways for practice to support aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD) in higher education. The activities are offered as sources of inspiration rather than fixed models to be replicated. They can be adapted to different disciplines, institutional contexts, and teaching formats, including lectures, seminars, workshops, project-based learning, and informal and non formal educational settings.

What unites all activities presented here is their emphasis on embodied, aesthetic, and relational engagement as a way of developing learning for democracy. Rather than prescribing how activities should be implemented, this part of the guide invites educators to reflect, and to build on them. Educators can, for example, consider how practices may affect participants differently, taking into account vulnerability, cultural familiarity, gendered dynamics, and institutional constraints. Educators can also intentionally participate alongside students in activities, rather than observing or directing from outside. Each activity can thus be planned and facilitated in various ways, depending on the context and the people involved.

Most AELD activities presented here can be facilitated without access to specialised materials, equipment, space, or expertise. In some cases, however, access to artistic tools or collaboration with professionals can enrich the process and support deeper engagement. Instead of relying on specialised resources, the approach encourages the creative use of available learning environments — rearranging classrooms, working in diverse on and off-campus settings, or moving activities outdoors and into community spaces. AELD activities and their adaptations can range from short, one-off interventions to fully developed curricula. In all of this, the broader intention is to cultivate and strengthen learning for democracy within the everyday fabric of pedagogical work.

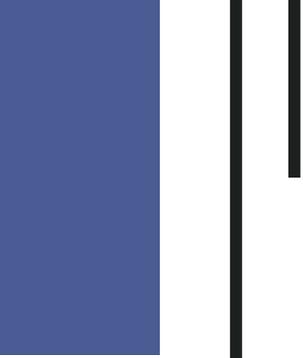
2. Working with aesthetic and embodied methods in higher education: from pedagogical orientation to pathways for practice

What is it all about?

Working with AELD methods and education for democracy in higher education begins with reflecting on how democratic values and principles manifest in everyday pedagogical choices and on the conditions you create for learning and participation. AELD does not require a separate course on democracy; rather, it invites educators to work within existing structures to make democracy a lived experience via aesthetic and embodied experiences. The guiding elements of this pedagogical orientation introduced in the first part of the main guide — democratic sensibility, responsive pedagogy, and the acceptive gaze — are intended to help educators navigate these activities.

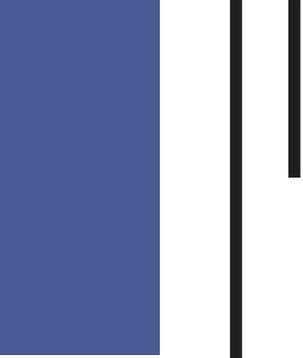
Aesthetic and embodied methods are not about producing art objects or putting on performances; sometimes works of art can be created in the process, but they are about learning through creative processes. Examples include:

- storytelling, poetry and reflective writing – to articulate meaning and connect experiences
- sound, rhythm and performance – to engage attention, emotion, and collective expression
- collage, drawing, painting, photography and film – to express perceptions and emotions visually and audiovisually
- movement, dance, and drama – to explore relationships, identity, and cooperation through the body
- mindful or sensory exercises – to deepen awareness of self, others, and environment



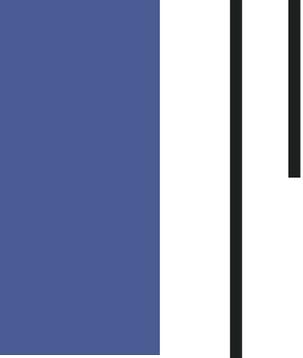
Methods such as storytelling, collective story-making, personal narratives, and the use of metaphors, fictional characters, or imagined situations can be utilised to create shared experiences and make meaning together. Narratives can be conveyed through voice and gesture, through written or visual forms, or through simple performative elements. The focus is not on elaborate materials, but on how stories are told, heard, and interpreted. Voice, rhythm, pauses, tone, and gestures play an important role in bringing a story to life. These methods often invite interaction. For example, by asking questions, encouraging reflection, or inviting participants to add, continue, or reinterpret parts of a story. In this way, listening becomes active, participation becomes shared, and engagement with the content becomes deeper and more personal.

Aesthetic and embodied methods can also include the use of images, symbols, objects, and spatial arrangements to think, express, and make meaning together. Sound, voice, music and moving images can be similarly utilised. These methods invite participants to work with visual drawing, collage, mapping, photography, or images or audiovisual media — such as audio recordings, video, soundscapes, or film — to express ideas, experiences, and relationships that may be difficult to capture in words alone. The emphasis is not on artistic skill or aesthetic quality, but on audiovisual expression as a form of thinking and communication. Simple materials are often sufficient, and the methods are often combined with moments of sharing and reflection, during which participants explain, interpret, or respond to one another's creations. In this way, seeing and hearing become a shared and relational process.

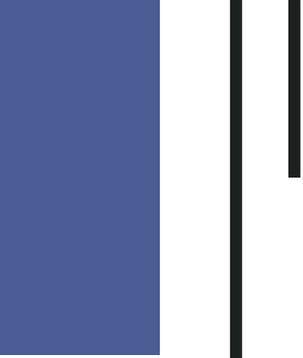


Embodied methods work with the body, movement, and action as central ways of learning. These methods draw attention to embodied experiences of democracy and the body as a reflective medium. In the following, embodied methods are divided into three categories: drama and role-based enactment, kinaesthetic movement activities, and reflexive practices. These categories are non-exhaustive and overlapping in many ways. They are meant as a broad approach, not as a strict guideline.

Drama and role-based enactment invite participants to explore ideas, situations, and relationships by inhabiting roles rather than merely discussing them. Learning takes place through bodily experience, interaction, and reflection. In drama-based activities, participants take on roles that together form a shared situation or narrative. These roles may be based on a prepared text, a reworked story, or a loosely structured scenario that allows for improvisation. Often, one person takes on the role of a narrator or facilitator, helping connect individual contributions into a coherent whole and guiding the flow of the activity. Simple props or spatial arrangements may be used to support imagination and engagement, but the focus remains on participants' embodied presence and interaction. Each participant contributes through their interpretation of a role, bringing personal perspectives, emotions, and bodily responses into the shared learning process.



In kinaesthetic movement activities and reflexive practices, attention can be drawn directly to one's body movements. These activities draw on dance and movement pedagogies, as well as reflexive practices, to connect with what is happening in one's body. The idea is that embodied experiences - including sensations, emotions, thoughts, and impulses - as well as movements visible to others, can be noticed and reflected on in responses to interactive situations. With that, we can learn about our current tendencies and patterns in groups and relationships. How we move during these activities mirrors how we move, act, and respond in other situations, which opens up possibilities for evaluating and, if needed, learning new ways of responding. This is important if we wish to transform our ways of acting so that they might better support democratic values in day-to-day encounters. As directing attention towards one's body can surface vulnerabilities such as body shame and therefore be intimidating, special care needs to be taken to co-create with students a safe learning environment to use these methods.

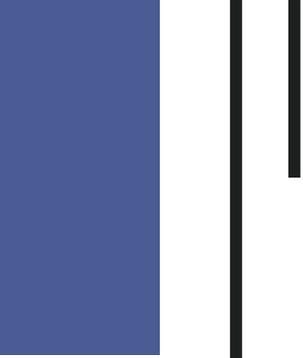


Why use aesthetic and embodied methods in higher education?

Aesthetic and embodied methods can be used across all age groups, including in higher education. In adult learning contexts, methods such as storytelling allow participants to engage with complex topics in an indirect yet meaningful way. Through narratives, students can engage with multiple layers of meaning, connect abstract ideas to lived experience, and reflect on different perspectives without the pressure to take an immediate position. These methods provide space for imagination, empathy, and critical reflection. They allow learners to explore ambiguity, contradiction, and complexity, and to relate learning content to their own biographies, values, and social contexts.

In higher education, methods that use visual or audiovisual materials offer multiple points of entry into learning. They support learners in approaching complex or abstract topics in more concrete and accessible ways. They allow students to slow down, externalise their thinking, and reflect on their assumptions, experiences, and positions from a different perspective. Working with images can be especially supportive for participants who find it easier to express themselves visually rather than verbally, or who need time and space to reflect before speaking. Because they rely on simple materials and flexible forms of engagement, visual methods can be adapted to diverse groups and learning contexts.

Embodied methods are particularly powerful in higher education because they allow adults to engage with learning content in a personal and experiential way. These methods also support different levels and modes of participation.

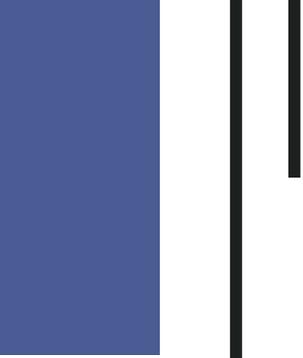


Through embodying roles, participants can explore perspectives that differ to their own, experiment with ways of being, or reflect on their own positions and assumptions from a new angle. Roles can be tailored to individual preferences, abilities, and needs, allowing everyone to participate in ways that feel possible and meaningful. This makes embodied methods suitable for diverse groups, including participants with specific or additional needs.

Using the body as a reflective medium is useful for cultivating self-awareness and understanding different others as equals. Embodied self-awareness activities help focus on the content of learning and engage with it personally. Learning to listen to bodily responses and to understand oneself and others holistically supports overall well-being and connectedness.

Possibilities of aesthetic and embodied methods in education for democracy

Aesthetic and embodied methods can support education for democracy in multiple ways. Stories — whether fictional or based on real experiences — create space to explore questions of power, inequality, participation, responsibility, and belonging. Their metaphorical and symbolic nature supports reflection on democracy as a complex, lived phenomenon rather than a fixed set of rules. Working with narratives supports democratic education by encouraging active listening, respect for different perspectives, and shared meaning-making. It helps participants recognise diversity of experience, reflect on unequal opportunities, and practice dialogue in a non-confrontational way.



In education for democracy, audiovisual engagement helps learners experience democracy as something shaped, negotiated, and reimaged together. This supports reflection on social structures and relationships while creating inclusive spaces that value diverse ways of seeing and expressing. Visually and audiovisually oriented methods create opportunities to explore democratic concepts such as power, inclusion, inequality, belonging, and participation in reflective ways. By making ideas visible and sensible, these methods help participants recognise different perspectives and understand how experiences of democracy may vary across individuals and groups. Working with audio/visual materials encourages attentive listening and respectful interpretation, as participants engage with each other's representations without immediate judgement. These methods also support collective meaning-making, as images, symbols, and soundscapes can be revisited, rearranged, and discussed over time.

Embodied methods offer rich possibilities for education for democracy by making social relationships, power dynamics, and ethical dilemmas visible and tangible. Using body movements as a reflective medium can ground participants in the present moment and highlight ways to influence current situations that respect others' differences. By recognising habitual patterns of action, we can evaluate and redirect them to support democratic values.

Embodied reflexivity and body-movement-based activities can be used to reflect on how democratic values emerge and how they can be further developed during learning events. These activities help us understand how our bodily responses and actions are connected to those of others and highlight the uniqueness of each participant's way of attending to the collective activities. This helps in understanding democracy as a collective nexus in which everyone participates through their actions.

Through role-taking and interaction, participants experience how responsibilities are shared, how decisions affect others, and how cooperation and conflict emerge. Drama-based activities encourage respect, responsibility, and attentiveness to others by having participants negotiate meaning and action together. They also create space to connect with personal feelings and thoughts, and to reflect critically on them in dialogue with others. In some contexts, outcomes of embodied work — such as short performances or shared enactments — can be brought beyond the learning space, contributing to democratic dialogue in wider institutional or community settings.

Through embodied methods, democracy is not only discussed but also experienced as a relational, lived process.



3. Examples of AELD educational activities

This section presents a range of AELD educational activities drawn from the case trials conducted within the AECED project. Each activity comes with a brief description of AELD orientation and suggestions for materials. Although the activities are based on real-life cases, they are offered as illustrative examples and sources of inspiration rather than fixed models to be replicated. For simple navigation and practical orientation, the activities are grouped into short activities, longer activities, and projects.

Short activities are designed to be quick and easy to integrate into teaching. Some are as quick as just a few minutes and can be taken as standalone moments, while others may take 20 to 30 minutes and can be used as part of a larger session. These activities do not require complex preparations, extensive materials, or specific facilitation skills, making them approachable and adaptable for a wide range of teaching contexts. Their flexible structure allows educators to modify them to suit different group sizes, disciplines, or learning goals. Most AELD educational activities in this practice companion fall under this category.

Longer activities in this practice companion are intended for more sustained engagement, while still fitting comfortably within the typical length of a class or seminar session (from approximately 45 minutes to a couple of hours). While they may involve some preparation, such as arranging materials, securing specific spaces, or drawing on particular facilitation skills, they remain flexible and adaptable for different teaching contexts. These activities enable deeper exploration, extended collaboration, and more complex processes, while remaining practical to implement in everyday higher education settings.

Projects support extended, in-depth learning, ranging from a single course component to a full course or semester. A project may focus on one AELD activity or combine several short and longer activities into a coherent process. Although working deeply with a specific method can benefit from expertise, educators are encouraged to adapt project structures to their own strengths. Projects require sustained commitment from both teachers and students, and they benefit from clear framing and shared expectations — including transparent goals, milestones, and roles — to guide longer-term engagement while still allowing flexibility and creativity.



Short Activities

Embodied reflexivity: Practising the acceptive gaze

AELD theme: co-creation of safe learning space, recognition of prejudices

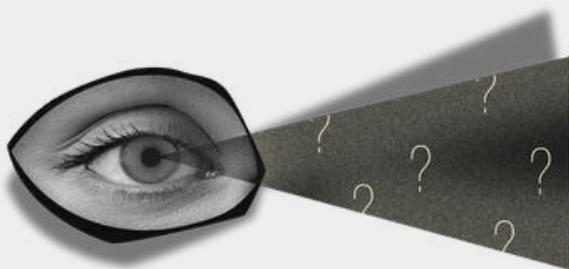
AELD key words: relational well-being, transforming dialogue, responsiveness

Activity type: short activity

While engaging in an AELD activity, the participants are encouraged to reflect on the emerging thoughts, emotions and sensations with an acceptive gaze. In practice, this involves the capacity to:

- pause to stop quick judgement(s)
- notice by describing what is present
- respond with recognition by acknowledging before evaluating

Practising the acceptive gaze during AELD activities helps educators and students rehearse this stance in discussion, peer feedback, and group work, so that recognition and mutual acceptance become a shared habit in classroom life and beyond. The acceptive gaze creates space to try different activities without an immediate fear of failure and, therefore, supports the co-creation of safe learning spaces. It encourages looking at everything that happens with curiosity and without judgement.





All the participants of the learning event, including the educator, are invited to aim the acceptive gaze towards their responses and those of others by practising recognition and description of the immediate emerging responses, for example:

- “I notice I’m speeding up”
- “I notice tightness in my body”
- “I notice an impulse to control/correct”
- “I notice I’m feeling defensive”

This reflexive moment provides the pause needed to make a more conscious choice, one that is not a direct reaction but is ethically evaluated from the perspective of democratic values.



Embodied reflexivity: Settling into presence

AELD theme: attunement and relational readiness

AELD key words: responsiveness; embodied awareness; attention; relational well-being

Activity type: short activity

This activity invites participants to attend to bodily sensations, posture, and presence at the beginning or during learning processes. The aim is not relaxation, but attunement to oneself and the group. By cultivating embodied awareness and reflexivity, participants become more responsive to others and to emerging group dynamics. This supports democratic learning by fostering attentive listening and ethical engagement.

Variation 1: Body scanning/mindfulness: This activity can be used as an orientation before the class to relax, focus, connect to one's body, and 'settle into space', and to prepare for other embodied methods. The participants are seated, standing, or lying down, with eyes closed, while the educator instructs them to focus on bodily sensations in different body parts, recognise their posture, and sense contact with the ground. This cultivates body awareness and strengthens the body and mind connection.

Variation 2: Bodyfulness: The facilitator guides participants to move different body parts at a time with different movement qualities (slow/fast/round/sharp, etc.) and to notice the sensations in each moving body part. This cultivates body awareness and strengthens the body and mind connection. It might be easier to concentrate on one's body while having movement tasks than observing "inner" embodied experiences while being still. The facilitator can also encourage participants to be aware of others' movements in the shared space.



Embodied reflexivity: Fostering attentive transitions

AELD theme: supporting continuity, care, and sustained engagement via sensory invitations

AELD key words: relational well-being, responsive pedagogy

Activity type: short activity

Variation 1: Grounding gestures. Participants are instructed to gently press their hands and arms against themselves or give themselves a hug. Supports transition, especially to and from high-stress situations such as before a test or after a speech at the front of a class.

Variation 2: Sensory moving. Highlight a transition by moving silently for a short time indoors or outdoors, perhaps a short walk. Being aware of sensations (sight, hearing, smell), emotions, thoughts, and noticing surroundings. Reflection cues: Pay attention to moments of arrival, departure, and group coming together.



Embodied reflexivity: Relational sensing

AELD theme: recognition, vulnerability, and ethical presence

AELD key words: acceptive gaze; relational well-being; responsiveness; recognition; embodiment

Activity type: short activity

Participants engage in non-verbal interaction, such as eye contact or coordinated movement, in which meaning emerges through attention and response. These encounters foreground vulnerability and recognition as central to democratic relations.

Variation 1: Sitting or standing face-to-face in pairs. The facilitator allocates two minutes and advises participants to look at each other without speaking. If one wants, one can step away from the reciprocal gaze for a moment and then return to it if that feels comfortable. The facilitator asks participants to notice the feelings, thoughts, and sensations evoked when they are seen and when they look at the other person. This exercise might evoke a more embodied, experiential, and emotional understanding of the other's humanness and feelings of mutual connectedness.

The activity strengthens democratic sensibility by practising presence without immediate judgement. The reflection focuses on how being seen and seeing others affect participation, trust, and responsibility within learning environments.

Variation 2: Participants sit in a circle, and the facilitator instructs them to seek eye contact with others. When eye contact has been made with the other person, they are advised to silently agree whether to change places. There can be variations, e.g. the facilitator assigns roles by touching some participants on the back while they have their eyes closed. The roles can be, e.g. "does not agree to change the places".

In the discussion, themes of rejection, disagreement, compromise, and embodied decision-making can be explored based on the emotions, thoughts, and sensations evoked during the activity.



Movement activity: Embodied enactments of interdependence

AELD theme: supporting embodied understanding of democracy as relational and highlighting the impact of individual actions on others and on the collective.

AELD Key words: power-sharing, relational well-being, democratic sensibility

Activity type: short activity

Materials: ball of yarn (variation 2), space to move around

Participants engage in collective embodied experiences, such as coordinated movement or working with shared materials, that illustrate interdependence and shared responsibility.

Variation 1: Mirroring movement. Participants are invited to form pairs. One person will start moving slowly, and the other will mirror the partner's movements. After a while, they are instructed to switch roles and finally improvise together. During the exercise, leading and following are meant to be communicated without words. In this activity, we can work together and share power through balanced leading and following, which can strengthen connection, respect, and dialogue, and deepen and support democratic, embodied relationships.

Variation 2: Yarn circle. Everyone, including the teacher/ facilitator, stands in a circle. A ball of yarn is tossed from one participant to another, so that each person ends up holding a part of the yarn, forming a web inside the circle. While connected to this web, everyone begins to move (facilitator may suggest "moving clockwise", "switching places", etc.), experiencing in an embodied way how each person's movements affect the others. This illustrates the co creation of the learning event and shows that the teacher is just one responsible "mover" in the process. After the activity, the group discusses and reflects on the feelings, sensations, and thoughts that emerged.



Visual activity: Working with picture cards

AELD theme: opening participation through mediated expression

AELD key words: equality and equity; democratic sensibility; transforming dialogue; acceptive gaze; inclusion; voice; multiple perspectives; recognition

Activity type: short activity

Materials: a set of any type of picture cards (images, postcards, photo cards, art cards, etc.)

In this activity, images function as mediating objects that allow participants to enter dialogue without the immediate pressure of verbal explanation or academic performance. By choosing an image that resonates with their experience or perspective, students can express meaning indirectly, thereby making participation more accessible and inclusive.

Working with picture cards supports democratic learning by valuing subjective interpretation and multiple meanings rather than a single “correct” answer. The activity invites an acceptive gaze, as participants first listen to and recognise each other’s associations before moving towards discussion or analysis, thereby practising democratic dialogue grounded in respect and recognition.



Audio activity: Learning through sound, music, or reading

AELD theme: supporting different ways of learning through the senses, shared attentiveness and emotional awareness

AELD key words: responsiveness, equality & equity, holistic learning

Activity type: short activity

Materials: reading materials (variation 1), any type of audio system (variation 2)

Participants listen together to music, soundscapes, or a text (read aloud), attending to atmosphere and collective presence. This activity supports multiple ways of learning through the senses, moving away from the dominance of the visual sense.

Variation 1: Slow reading in a circle. The intent is to read aloud as slowly as possible. Slowing down focuses attention and gives space for responsiveness. The assigned reading can be part of the course literature or chosen particularly for this activity. Participants take turns reading, paying attention not only to the text's content but also to its tempo, rhythm, tone of voice, and the soundscape created by the reading.

Variation 2: Learning through music. The educator chooses soundtracks or music which is connected to the subject of the study. It is listened to with students, with a discussion on how music and sound contribute to the creation of atmosphere, feelings, and emotions in society, and how sounds, music, and voices are part of learning and knowledge creation.



Audiovisual activity: Film or video as a reflective medium

AELD theme: affective engagement and plural meaning-making

AELD key words: democratic sensibility; transforming dialogue; holistic learning; affect; imagination; ethical reflection; responsiveness

Activity type: short activity

Materials: short films or video excerpts reflecting the chosen topic

In this activity, short films or video excerpts are used to evoke emotional, ethical, and relational responses connected to democratic themes. Rather than starting with analysis or interpretation, reflection begins by attending to how participants are affected — what they feel, notice, or are moved by.

By foregrounding affect and embodied response, this activity supports holistic democratic learning that integrates thinking, feeling, and imagination. It also creates space for plural meaning-making, as different responses are recognised as equally valid starting points for dialogue, fostering responsiveness and ethical attentiveness in discussion.

Visual activity: Drawing perceptions

AELD theme: difference, interpretation, and plurality

AELD key words: diversity; perspective; democratic dialogue; interpretation; imagination; respect for difference

Activity type: short activity

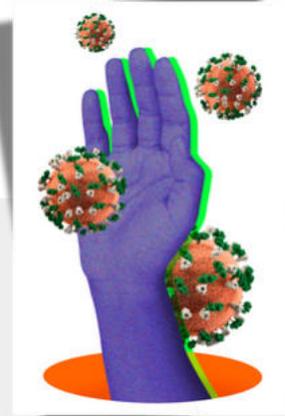
Materials: traditional or digital drawing equipment, space for displaying the works

Participants are asked to draw a concept (e.g. equality, conflict, democracy, discrimination). The drawings are then displayed together as a small exhibition.

This activity reveals how people perceive and imagine the same concept differently. It supports democratic learning by legitimising plurality and practising respectful dialogue across difference.

Possible discussion questions: How do these drawings differ, and what do they have in common? What do these differences tell us about how we understand democracy? How can disagreement coexist with mutual respect?





Visual activity: Drawing the “virus that harms democracy”

AELD theme: threats to democracy and critical awareness

AELD key words: power; exclusion; manipulation; democratic sensibility; critical reflection; prevention

Activity type: short activity

Materials: traditional or digital drawing equipment

Participants draw (by hand or digitally) a “virus” that harms democracy, giving it a name and characteristics. They reflect on how it spreads, what feeds it, and how it might be prevented or dismantled.

This activity supports critical democratic learning by externalising abstract threats and making them visible. It encourages collective reflection on responsibility, resistance, and care for democratic processes.

Possible discussion questions: What conditions allow this “virus” to grow? Where do we encounter it in everyday life or institutions? What practices help protect and strengthen democracy?

Visual/Narrative activity: Photography as democratic storytelling

AELD theme: noticing everyday democracy in learning environments

AELD key words: freedom; responsiveness; democratic sensibility; inclusion/exclusion; visibility/invisibility; attention; relational awareness

Activity type: short activity

Materials: photography equipment (cameras/smartphones/tablets, etc.)

This activity invites participants to observe and document moments in their everyday learning environments that reflect democratic conditions, including participation, exclusion, care, and power. Through photography, students slow down and become more attentive to how democracy is lived in ordinary spaces and interactions, rather than only discussed in abstract terms.

Sharing and reflecting on photographs supports democratic sensibility by making visible what is often taken for granted or overlooked. The activity encourages responsiveness, as participants learn to notice how learning environments affect different people differently and to reflect on whose experiences are made visible and whose remain unseen.



Visual/Narrative activity: Figure on the wall

AELD theme: identity, perception, and social positioning

AELD key words: identity; recognition; inclusion/exclusion; democratic sensibility; embodiment; perspective-taking

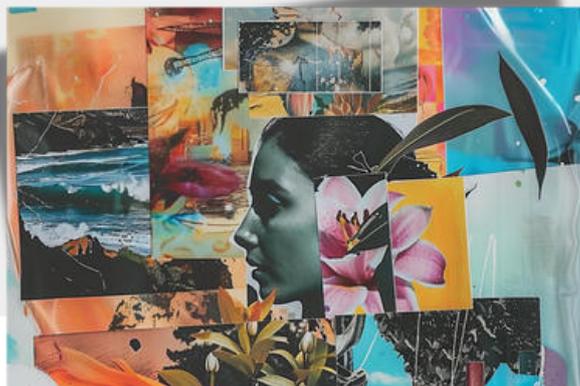
Activity type: short activity

Materials: drawn or printed human figure, pens, post-it notes. Alternatively, any collaborative digital whiteboard (e.g. Miro, Mural, Whiteboard).

Participants work with a drawn human figure. The figure can be drawn on paper or with a digital tool that allows multiple people to work at the same time. Inside the figure, participants write feelings, intentions, or self-perceptions; outside, they write how the person is seen or labelled by others. Attention is given to where words are placed on the body.

This activity supports democratic learning by exploring how identities are shaped relationally. It highlights tensions between self-understanding and social perception, encouraging empathy and critical reflection on categorisation and power.

Possible discussion questions: What differences do you notice between inner and outer descriptions? How do social labels affect participation and belonging? What responsibilities do we have in how we see and describe others?



Narrative activity: Fishbowl dialogue

AELD theme: voice, inclusion, and decision-making under time pressure

AELD key words: transforming dialogue; participation; power-sharing; democratic sensibility; responsiveness; inclusion/exclusion

Activity type: short activity

Materials: five chairs

Five chairs form an inner circle. Only those who sit in the inner circle can speak; others listen. To join, a participant taps someone on the shoulder and swaps in. Use a short dilemma relevant to the group (mobility, institutional rule, assessment conflict, inclusion issue). Reflect not only on the solution but on the process: Who entered? Who stayed out? Why?





Narrative activity: “What would happen if...?”

AELD theme: responsibility and interdependence in a democratic society

AELD key words: democratic sensibility; responsibility; freedom; equality and equity; systems thinking; ethical reflection; shared worlds

Activity type: short activity

Participants write consequences of a scenario (e.g. “What if there were no human rights?” “What if universities disappeared?”). Build second and third order consequences.

This activity helps learners see democracy as a web of interdependencies rather than a set of opinions. It strengthens democratic sensibility by shifting from “my view” to “our shared conditions,” and by making visible how responsibility is distributed across institutions, communities, and everyday choices.

Possible discussion questions: Which consequences affect some groups more than others? What responsibilities appear when we see interdependence? What does the university owe to society — and what does society owe to the university?



Movement activity: Equality and equity through collective movement

AELD theme: embodied understanding of equity and shared responsibility.

AELD key words: equality and equity, holistic learning

Activity type: longer activity

Materials: space to move around, inflatable balloon(s) and chairs (variation 2)

Participants move together as they negotiate pace, coordination, or direction. Differences in bodies, speed, and comfort become visible.

Variation 1: Slow walk in a row. In a cleared space, participants are advised to walk as slowly as possible from side to side in a row, gaze forward, and sense each other's movements with peripheral vision. They are advised to maintain a straight row and reflect on the emerging emotions, sensations, and thoughts while doing so.

“Forcing” everyone in the same speed and collective movement can evoke such questions as who defines the pace and how the collective pace is developing between different persons who have their individual relation to the concept of “slow walk”. It offers opportunities to reflect on one's responses to others' different rhythms and how these responses affect the collective rhythm and the group's performance of the task together.

Reflect with the group on how the participants felt during the exercise. What surprised them?

Variation 2: Balloons. Divide the participants into two groups. One part of the group stands on chairs, while the other part is on the floor. The task is to keep the balloon(s) in the air as a group. Roles can be changed or kept the same. Part of the group can also act as spectators and observe. Reflection cues: Pay attention to challenges of democratic participation and “structural inequalities”; some have better access to the balloons than others. Activity provides an affective, embodied experience of unequal starting points and positions in society. Can attend to questions of privileges, social hierarchies, gender dynamics, class, etc.



Visual activity: Mapping the learning space

AELD theme: participation, inclusion, and power in everyday learning environments

AELD key words: democratic sensibility; equality and equity; power-sharing; responsiveness; acceptive gaze; visibility/invisibility; belonging

Activity type: longer activity

Materials: traditional or digital drawing equipment

Participants draw a “map” of a real learning environment they know (e.g. a lecture hall, seminar room, online classroom, corridor, or faculty meeting space). The map should show where people usually sit/stand, who tends to speak, who stays silent, where attention goes, and where discomfort or a sense of safety is felt. Maps can include symbols, colours, arrows, and short words.

After mapping, participants share in pairs or small groups. The group then discusses: What does this map reveal about participation and power? Who is centred and who is peripheral? What small changes could make the space more democratic?

Possible reflective questions: Where do I feel I belong in this space — and where do I withdraw? Who is visible, and who is present but not recognised? What would change if we altered seating, pacing, or modes of expression? What small changes could make this space more democratic?



Crafting activity: Democratic collage

AELD theme: negotiation, inclusion, multimodal expression, and power sharing in democratic meaning-making

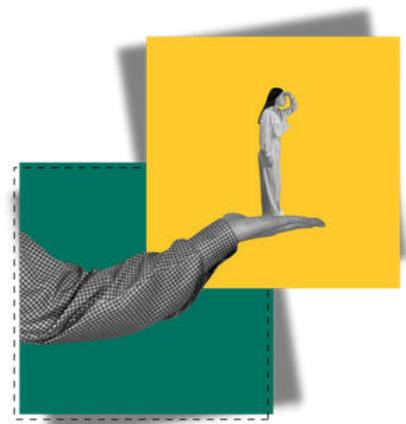
AELD key words: democratic sensibility; equality and equity; power-sharing; responsiveness; acceptive gaze; visibility/invisibility

Activity type: longer activity

Materials: various materials for collaging: e.g. paper-based materials (magazines, newspapers, brochures, post cards, sticky notes...), textures and natural materials (ribbons, yarn, dried leaves, small twigs...), small objects and tactile elements (buttons, beads, bottle caps, toys...), adhesives and tools (glue sticks, tape, scissors, stamps, markers, coloured pens...). For digital/hybrid options: printed screenshots or digital artefacts, QR codes linking to reflective texts or media, tablets or devices for adding a digital collage layer afterwards, etc.

Use collage — crafting with diverse materials — as an aesthetic and embodied method to foster creative participatory learning. The topic of the collage can be a concept (e.g. democracy, equality, conflict, discrimination) or left open. Invite students to work together with images, textures, and symbols so they can externalise ideas, experiment playfully, and think through making. Choose materials with varying textures to support embodied engagement. Include items that evoke symbolic or metaphorical associations (e.g. maps, words, abstract images) and provide enough variety so that students can express ideas beyond written language, thereby supporting democratic participation.

Structure the activity to slow the pace of interaction and open space for multiple voices, allowing diverse perspectives and forms of expression to emerge. Guide students to co-construct a shared visual field, practising negotiation, imagination, and mutual recognition. In this way, collage becomes a practical tool for advancing democratic aims and cultivating inclusive, dialogic learning environments.



Narrative activity: Story about a character

AELD theme: inclusion and support in everyday learning relationships

AELD key words: democratic sensibility; equality and equity; acceptive gaze; dialogue; vulnerability; recognition; participation; responsiveness

Activity type: longer activity

Each participant is assigned a role. After reading a brief outline of the scenario to be explored, participants are invited to step into their character's perspective and imagine how the situation is experienced from within that role.

Participants then create a short visual narrative consisting of three images (drawings, symbols, or photographs). Each image represents a key moment in the character's story (for example, the situation itself, the character's insecurity or emotional tension, and a possible turning point).

Once the stories are created, participants sit together in a circle. One by one, each participant presents their three images and briefly explains the story behind them. The rest of the group responds using reflective, open-ended questions to explore the character's insecurities and challenges and to collectively suggest possible forms of support or alternative actions.

The activity can be carried out individually or in pairs, depending on group size and participants' comfort levels.



These are examples of roles:

- they don't like school, provoke the teacher, and are restless in class
- often irritable, has only one friend, very picky
- very sociable, talks a lot, often changes friends, superficial in tasks
- silent, more non-verbal than verbal, always finishes first, but never answers
- give everything, never say no, everyone loves them, but don't respect them
- passive, unmotivated, only interested in football, quarrels with parents, refuses to cooperate

Possible discussion questions: What is the character's insecurity? How do we discover it? How can we responsibly position ourselves towards them (as teachers, educators, parents, friends)? How should we respond to such behaviour in a group? What else can we do? How is the gender (or some other dimension of a person's identity) of the character related to their behaviour?



Drama-based activity: Guided imagination

AELD theme: power, authority, and responsibility

AELD key words: democratic sensibility; imagination; responsibility; power; ethical reflection; responsiveness

Activity type: longer activity

This activity uses guided imagination and improvisation to explore how power is constructed, justified, and exercised, and how democratic responsibility emerges in relation to authority.

The session begins with a grounding exercise. Participants sit comfortably and close their eyes. The educator slowly reads a descriptive text that invites them to imagine themselves as inhabitants of a peaceful kingdom ruled by a young, newly crowned king. The sensory-rich narrative (landscape, weather, daily routines, sounds, smells, food) helps participants to enter the fictional world emotionally and bodily, not only cognitively. At the end of the story, when the atmosphere of calm and safety is fully established, the educator asks them to open their eyes and reflect briefly: Who are you in this kingdom? What do you expect from your king? How do you feel about his power and your own position?



The activity then moves into collective improvisation. The educator explains that the king, who has been afraid of the dark since childhood, now wants to remove darkness from the kingdom entirely. Wanting to avoid appearing as a tyrant, he gathers his closest circle: royal advisers, the treasurer, the historian, the court fool, and several servants. Their task is to help him design a strategy to convince the population that darkness is dangerous and must be eliminated. Participants take on these roles and improvise a council meeting in which arguments, fears, interests, and forms of persuasion are expressed. The scene is briefly performed for the rest of the group.

After the improvisation, the educator continues the narrative: the advisers succeed in convincing the people, darkness is officially forbidden, and huge resources are invested in artificial light. A large figure of the king is placed on the wall. In small groups, participants write words or phrases inside the figure (what the king is like in himself: fears, motivations, insecurities, intentions) and outside the figure (how he presents himself and how he is perceived by others: protector, saviour, ruler, despot, visionary, etc.). This visualisation opens a reflection on the difference between inner motives and public authority, and on how power is represented and legitimised.

The story then continues: the kingdom is flooded with light, citizens must buy special lighting equipment, and at first everything seems safe and orderly. The educator pauses and asks, "And then what happens?" Participants, working in groups, create frozen images (tableaux) that respond to the question: Is the dark really the problem? Or what new problems emerge when darkness is forbidden? Each group presents a still image that symbolically shows consequences such as exclusion, inequality, loss of rest, surveillance, control, or resistance.



The activity concludes with a guided discussion, linking the fictional situation to real democratic dilemmas:

- The king has power and claims to act for the common good. Does power justify imposing fear and control?
- What responsibility does a leader have to listen, to doubt, and to share decision-making?
- How do fear and security discourses shape public consent?
- Which characters in the story had voice and influence, and which were powerless or silenced?
- Would switching the king for a queen in the story make a difference in your interpretations? Does the gender of a ruler matter?
- How are experts, history, finances, and “common sense” used to legitimise decisions?
- If you were in the king’s position, what would you do differently?
- How does this story reflect contemporary societies and educational institutions?



Narrative activity: Story transmission and distortion

AELD theme: stereotypes, assumptions, and how narratives shape social reality

AELD key words: democratic sensibility; transforming dialogue; critical reflection; inclusion/exclusion; bias; responsibility; acceptive gaze

Activity type: longer activity

In this activity, the educator prepares a short story that is open to interpretation and contains socially meaningful elements, such as different characters, relationships, or situations. Participants are divided into two groups and arranged in two lines. In each group, only the first person hears or reads the original story, quietly and individually, so that no one else has access to it. This person whispers the story to the next participant, who, in turn, whispers what they understood to the next, and so on, until the story reaches the last person in the line. No repetitions or clarifications are allowed; each participant can hear the story only once and must rely on their own listening and interpretation.

The last person in each group then retells the story aloud to the whole group. As a result, two different versions of the same original story usually emerge. These versions are compared with each other and, if appropriate, with the original text. The group reflects on how and why the story changed during transmission: which details were lost, which were emphasised, and which new elements were added.



The discussion focuses on the assumptions, stereotypes, and value judgments that may have entered the narrative. Participants are invited to consider how they “filled in the gaps” when something was unclear, how their prior experiences and cultural frames shaped what they heard and passed on, and whose perspectives became more visible or invisible in the retold versions. The activity opens reflection on how similar processes of distortion and simplification operate in everyday communication, media, and social interaction, and how they contribute to the construction of social identities, inclusion and exclusion, and, in some cases, to the reproduction of injustice.

Projects



Project: Relational embodied learning pathways

AELD theme: supporting democratic relations, dialogue, belonging and shared responsibility via aesthetic and embodied learning

AELD Key words: acceptive gaze, power-sharing, responsiveness, transforming dialogue, holistic learning

Activity type: project

Materials: depending on the needs of the project

This activity can be expanded into a transversal higher education project that integrates several short or longer AELD activities, all designed to foster democratic relationships, dialogue, belonging, and shared responsibility. This example centres on collaborative movement, gesture, and visual crafting to cultivate responsiveness, collective presence, and mutual attunement in academic spaces often dominated by cognitive performance and verbal argumentation. Through interconnected aesthetic activities, participants engage in power-sharing and holistic learning, exploring how embodied and visual methods can support more inclusive and relational educational environments.

The project unfolds over several sessions integrated into regular courses, lectures, or seminars, regardless of subject area. Different activities can be chosen for each session and/or for different purposes. In addition, selected activities can be repeated throughout the project, allowing participants to engage more deeply and uncover new meanings as they become more familiar with the activities and co-develop them.

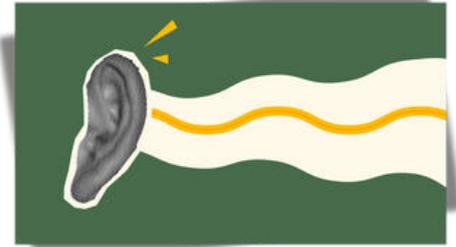


For example, the educator can choose to focus on promoting open dialogue and reducing hierarchy through the pathway of an acceptive gaze. The course could thus begin with an invitation to practise the acceptive gaze by focusing on embodied reflection or on visual means, such as using picture cards. These activities invite an acceptive gaze, as participants recognise their own starting points and each other's associations and multiple meanings, before moving towards discussion or analysis, thereby practising democratic dialogue grounded in respect and recognition.

Transitional moments in the project, or for example instances of high intensity, pressure, and stress during the course – such as student presentations or exam situations – could be supported with simple grounding gestures, body scanning activities, and attention to breathing.

Across the project/course, group dynamics could be addressed and supported by activities that call for collaboration and co-creation, such as collaging, or by activities that make relationality tangible, such as the yarn circle. Participants can be encouraged to engage in non-verbal interaction, such as eye contact or mirroring movements, in which meaning emerges through attention and response, and in which vulnerability and recognition are seen as central to democratic relations.

To close the project, invite participants to pause and reflect on how the aesthetic and embodied and embodied activities have shaped their sense of dialogue, belonging, and shared responsibility in the group. Encourage them to consider moments of power-sharing, responsiveness, or transforming dialogue that stood out during the process, and to articulate how these experiences might inform their ongoing learning and relationships beyond the course. A brief collective reflection circle, a shared visual or embodied gesture, or a return to an earlier activity can serve as a meaningful way to acknowledge the learning journey and bring the project to a thoughtful close.



Project: Grounding through sound, music, or reading

AELD theme: supporting emotional regulation, shared attentiveness, and relational safety.

AELD key words: relational well-being, responsiveness

Activity type: project

Materials: depending on the needs of the project

This activity can be developed into a longer, transversal project in higher education, applicable across disciplines, that uses shared listening as a pedagogical method to cultivate democratic relationships, attentiveness, and emotional attunement within learning communities. The project centres on grounding through sound, music, and spoken word to support emotional regulation, collective presence, and relational safety in academic spaces often dominated by cognitive performance and verbal argumentation.

The project unfolds over several sessions and is integrated into regular courses across subject areas. At the beginning of selected seminars or lectures, the educator invites students into a short period of shared listening. This may involve listening to instrumental music, environmental soundscapes, or a text read aloud (literary, philosophical, poetic, or thematically connected to the course). The focus is not on analysis but on sensing atmosphere, rhythm, tone, and emotional resonance. Students are invited to notice their bodily responses, their breathing, their level of tension or relaxation, and the subtle ways in which attention becomes synchronised within the group.



After the listening phase, a brief reflective dialogue or written reflection follows. Students may be asked to describe what they noticed in themselves and in the collective space: How did the shared sound influence their sense of calm, openness, or readiness to engage? Did they feel more connected to others, more able to listen, more willing to speak? Over time, these reflections are linked to discussions about communication, power, voice, and participation in academic settings. The activity thus becomes a method for making visible the affective and relational conditions of democratic learning: who feels safe to speak, who remains silent, how attentiveness is distributed, and how collective atmospheres shape inclusion and exclusion.

Throughout the semester, students can take turns selecting sounds, music, or texts, thereby practising responsibility, care for the group, and sensitivity to the diversity of tastes, cultures, and emotional states. This rotation supports democratic participation and shared ownership of the learning space. The group also reflects on how choices of sound or voice can invite, soothe, disturb, or exclude, and how responsiveness to others' emotional and sensory experiences is a core democratic competence.



Project: Exploring democracy via dance, choreography, and performance

AELD theme: transforming societal questions into aesthetic and physical expression

AELD Key words: power sharing, transforming dialogue, holistic learning

Activity type: project

Materials: depending on the needs of the project

This project activity aims to transform societal questions into aesthetic and physical expression through the creation of joint choreography. Taking the outcome outside the classroom also contributes to democratic dialogue in the wider community. The activity can start with a question about how students experience and relate to the idea of democracy as lived practice. Movement laboratories allow students to explore their embodied responses to simple movement principles, such as gravity and balance. The students also progress from movement improvisation to small compositions, which the facilitator observes, aiming to foster a subjective experience of everyone's creative capacity in relation to space, others, and ideas, while encouraging and observing others' movements. Following this, performative movement scenes reflecting the topic of “democracy” are developed from students' own experiences. Experiences are “translated” into movements and collective scenes in which principles such as togetherness and exclusion, engagement and individualisation, support and reflection become visible. Finally, the students and facilitator bring all the movement material together in a performance.

4. Closing the practice companion: connecting across educational phases

This higher education Practice Companion has offered concrete activities and pathways for enacting aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD) in the everyday realities of higher education. It is intended as a flexible resource — supporting experimentation, adaptation, and reflective return as democratic learning is lived through relationships, bodies, spaces, and shared inquiry.

The Companion also sits within the wider ecology of AECED Framework, Guides and Practice Companions across educational phases. Read alongside the resources for early years and primary, secondary, and adult/professional learning, it contributes to a life-course and intergenerational perspective on democratic education: democracy is cultivated over time, across transitions, and through encounters between different ages, roles, and learning cultures. Together, these phase-based resources form a connected repertoire for educators — inviting cross-phase inspiration and supporting democratic practice across the whole educational life course.

