

# CONNECTING WITH DEMOCRACY

A PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK  
FOR EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY



Funded by  
the European Union



UK Research  
and Innovation





## Funding

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

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Connecting with Democracy: A Pedagogical Framework for Education for Democracy  
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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.

## This report can be cited as:

AECED Consortium (2026). Connecting with Democracy: A Pedagogical Framework for Education for Democracy. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18466370>



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## What can be done to tackle the many challenges facing democracy today?



A key part of the answer lies in creating opportunities for people to connect with

- The values, principles and possibilities of democracy
- The human qualities that make a flourishing democracy possible
- The power of relating democratically with others

This Framework explains a way of educating for democracy that can support these connections. It introduces aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD), which puts learning through moving, listening, feeling, relating to others, and enhancing awareness at the centre of education for democracy.

Many educators already use aesthetic and embodied methods, and many others work explicitly to enhance democracy through civic or participatory education. What is novel in AELD is the deliberate integration of these two traditions – connecting aesthetic and embodied learning with the cultivation of democratic relations, values and sensibilities. For educators already familiar with arts-based or embodied practices, AELD offers a new lens through which to recognise and extend the democratic potential of their work. For educators focused on democracy and civic education, the Framework offers pathways into education for democracy within their own practice.

## Why is it important?



Connecting with democracy is not only about what we know or think, which is sometimes called cognitive learning. Connecting with democracy requires a kind of learning that engages with what we feel, sense, value, and do, as well as with how we relate to each other and our environment. Aesthetic and embodied education for democracy (AELD) supports this kind of learning. Our research has shown that it can:

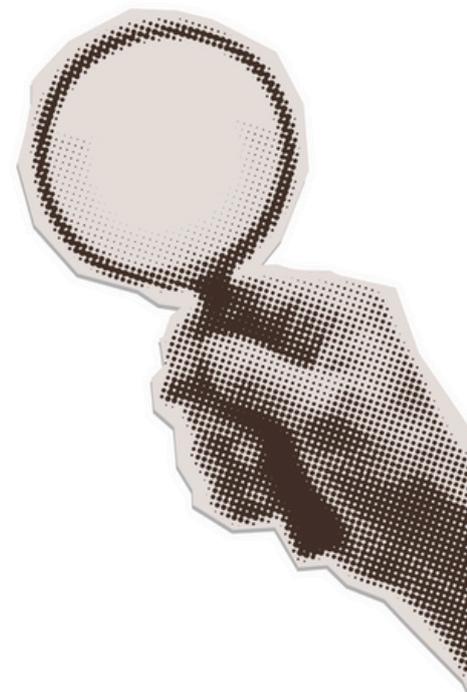
- Cultivate qualities essential to democracy, such as humility, respect, empathy and active listening
- Increase awareness of aesthetic and embodied senses so people know and understand themselves and the world in different ways
- Encourage more democratic ways of learning and creating knowledge
- Create a collaborative learning journey of discovery, filled with possibilities
- Cultivate a heightened democratic sensibility

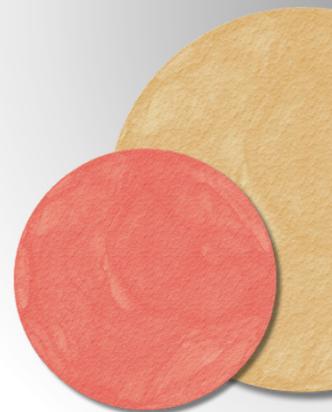
The Framework is intended for anyone interested in education for democracy – whether you want to cultivate democratic cultures, relationships, and behaviours, or explore the value of arts-based and embodied learning for inclusion, participation, and democratic practice. This includes: educators, facilitators of adult, professional, and organisational learning, leaders, researchers, and policy-makers in educational and other institutions, as well as in community settings. The Framework serves as a gateway to more detailed resources that offer guidance about the practice of aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD).

If this Framework resonates with your interests and priorities, it offers an invitation to explore how democracy can be felt, enacted and learned together.

**To explore AELD in more depth, the best starting point is the AECED Project website at [www.aeced.org](http://www.aeced.org). There you can find:**

- **the Pedagogical Framework (this document)**
- **the AECED Guides for Practice, which offer examples, activities, and**
- **reflection tools and resources**
- **the Research Reports (Deliverables D4.4 and D4.5)**





## **Table of Contents**

1. Introduction
2. Challenges facing democracy
3. Why aesthetic and embodied learning matters for democracy
4. Defining aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy
5. Core ideas underpinning AELD
6. Audiences and contexts for AELD
7. Adapting AELD across local, national and cultural contexts
8. From framework to practice

## Appendices

Glossary

Case settings and the participants/learners who engaged with AECED

Recommended Reading

# 1. Introduction



Democracy today faces many challenges: declining trust in institutions and leaders, social and political polarisation, the spread of disinformation, persistent inequalities, and barriers to meaningful civic engagement, all intensified by global pressures. How to tackle these challenges is a pressing question. The AECED project (2023–2026, funded by Horizon Europe and UKRI) brought together research teams from 6 countries (Croatia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Portugal and the United Kingdom) to address this problem.

Our conclusion is that a key part of the answer lies in creating opportunities for people to connect with the values, principles, and possibilities of democracy – the human qualities that sustain democratic life – and to experience the power of relating to others democratically.

What do we mean by connect? We mean experiencing democracy as a living, felt relationship – sensing its ideas and possibilities through engagement, reflection, and interaction, rather than only through thought.

Connecting with democracy is not just about the head and what people know and think. Equally important is the learning that happens without language; it's about engaging people through their senses, feelings, and physical movement and reactions. It's about enhancing awareness of the aesthetic and embodied aspects of democracy and democratic relations, and of their importance in cultivating essential human qualities.

Research highlights that our bodies and feelings play a crucial role in learning, helping us understand how connections to democracy can be cultivated. Activities involving movement, bodily awareness, creative expression, and reflection on aesthetic and bodily experiences are especially important. They can enable people to understand and experience democracy in new ways that are meaningful to them. These activities are sometimes referred to as arts-based and embodied (ABE) methods of learning. We refer to them as aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods.

The value of these methods of learning extends from the very youngest learners through to adults of all ages. They can help everyone, regardless of age, gender, class, racial or ethnic background, connect with democracy. We call this approach to education for democracy aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD).

As outlined above, connecting with democracy goes beyond knowledge and thought. It also involves learning that happens without words – through sensation, emotion, rhythm, gesture, proximity, silence, and shared presence. This “more-than-verbal” learning can shape how people come to recognise dignity, difference, vulnerability, power and responsibility in everyday life interactions, and how democratic life is sensed, rehearsed and sustained in practice.



Building on these insights about connecting with democracy through aesthetic and embodied learning, the AECED project researched and designed a Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides for practice, to explore how these approaches could support AELD in a variety of educational and professional contexts.

Researchers in the consortium then carried out, across a variety of contexts, 19 participatory action research studies on the Prototype Framework and Guides, and on participants' experiences of trialling AELD and of using aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods.

The research was undertaken across all six partner countries, at all levels of education: Early Years and Primary Education, Secondary Education, Higher Education, and Adult Education, Professional and Organisational Learning.



The project's work on AELD, the Framework, and the Guides draws on a rich set of ideas developed and applied in the research.

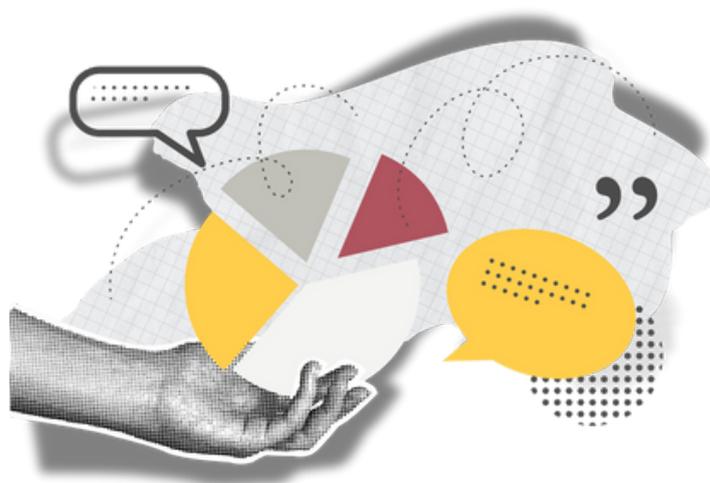
These include:

- A vision of democracy as democracy-as-becoming – in which democracy is seen as a process continually created through aesthetic, embodied and relational experience,
- Democratic values – freedom, equality, equity, and responsiveness,
- Principles of holistic democracy – power sharing, transforming dialogue, relational well-being and holistic learning,
- Responsive pedagogy – giving practical effect to the active role of both educators and learners, emphasising that education is a shared endeavour grounded in mutual responsibility and a continual flow of reciprocal learning,
- Democratic sensibility – 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,
- The acceptive gaze – an attitude of perceiving oneself and others with openness and acceptance, avoiding immediate judgement, and recognising vulnerability and difference as resources for more democratic learning.

Our 19 participatory action research case studies showed that AELD can:

- Cultivate qualities essential to democracy
- Increase awareness of aesthetic and embodied senses
- Encourage more democratic ways of learning and creating knowledge
- Help people understand democracy in new ways, moving beyond purely cognitive engagement
- Provide a learning journey of discovery filled with possibilities
- Cultivate a heightened democratic sensibility

The insights gained from the research have been applied to refine the prototype resources, resulting in this new framework, “Connecting with democracy: A pedagogical framework for education for democracy” (hereafter referred to as the Framework), and four Guides to Practice. Each Guide to Practice is focused on a different phase of education. These resources are freely available for anyone to access, download, use and adapt. Together, the Framework and Guides provide a foundation for engaging with AELD.

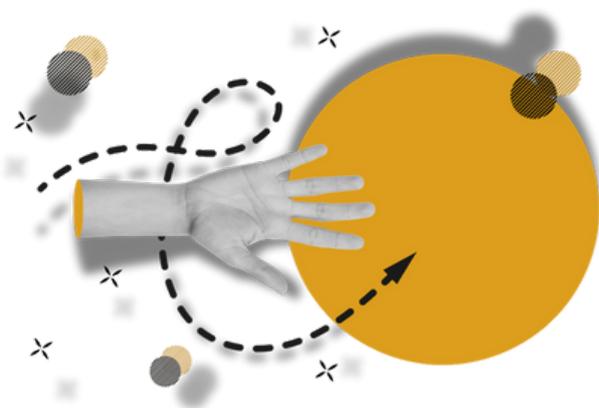


Many educators across different educational phases are already using aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods, which, as we have noted, are sometimes called arts-based and embodied methods of learning. Our research aims to support the expansion of these approaches in education for democracy, across all subjects and levels of education.

In short, more AELD is needed because it helps people explore and create a felt connection with the qualities, values, and principles that make democracy a living, participatory process. The impact of education for democracy can be strengthened through greater support for, and innovation in, aesthetic and embodied learning.

We invite you to explore the rest of this Framework and then visit the other resources created by the AECED project. More information is on the AECED website at [aeced.org](http://aeced.org).

The Framework and Guides are not blueprints to be rigidly followed, but invitations to engage with AELD and to creatively adapt it to the diverse educational and cultural contexts across Europe and beyond.



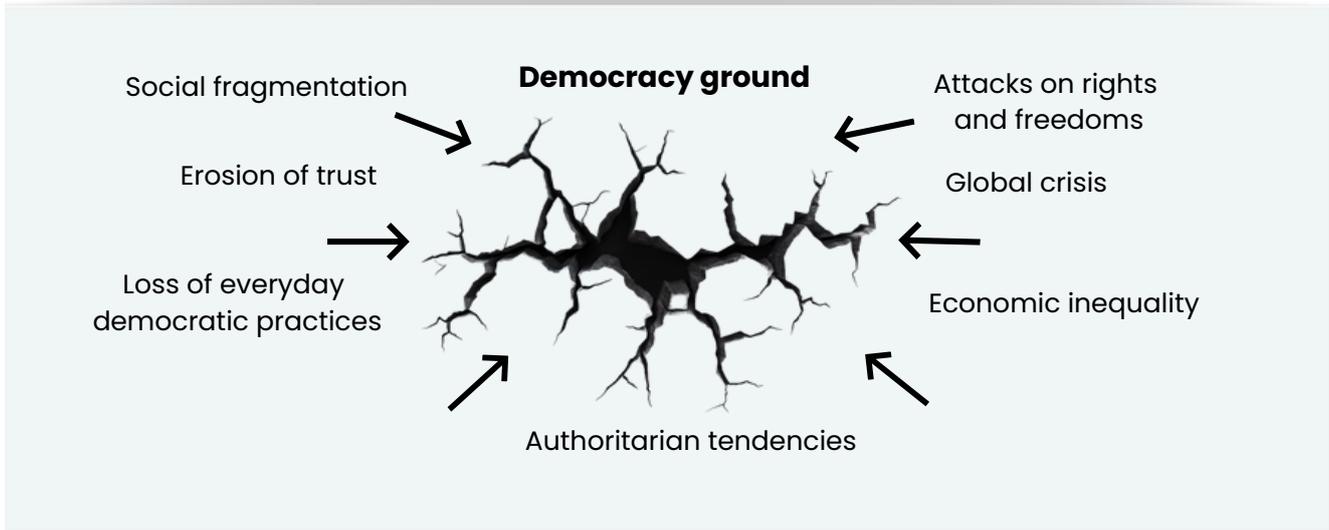
## 2. Challenges facing democracy



Across Europe and beyond, democracy is increasingly under attack. Many people no longer feel connected to it in their everyday lives, or feel disillusioned with the practice of democracy. Political participation, civic trust and social connection are weakening, while democracy is often experienced as distant, formal, or merely procedural. Yet democracy is grounded in something much smaller and more fragile: the daily micro practices through which people listen, negotiate, care for one another, relate to one another, and act together.

When these foundations weaken – in classrooms, families, workplaces, and communities – democracy loses its grounding and legitimacy. Figure A illustrates the effects of jolts and vibrations of the ‘ground’ of democracy: it shows how multiple challenges and attacks can erode or fracture the foundation on which democratic relations and institutions are built, making the everyday practices that sustain democracy more fragile.





**Figure A: Effects on democratic ground** (Created by Monika Pažur, 2025)

**Figure A:** This diagram shows democracy as something supported by everyday “ground-level” practices (how people listen, negotiate, care, relate, and act together). It illustrates how multiple pressures – such as social fragmentation, erosion of trust, economic inequality, attacks on rights and freedoms, global crisis, and authoritarian tendencies – can weaken or fracture this ground, making everyday democratic practices more fragile.

The challenge of supporting democracy is not only social and political – it is also deeply pedagogical. It raises the question of how people can actively explore what it means to become democratic. Education for democracy is more than giving information or encouraging people to adopt particular values, behaviours, or standards of active citizenship. It must engage people’s imagination, their feelings, emotions, and bodily senses, and their capacity for relating to others; without this engagement, there’s a danger that democracy remains an abstract ideal rather than being experienced as a lived – or living – practice. Learners and educators may grasp democratic values intellectually, but without embodied experiences – including movement, dialogue, and the co-creation of activities – they may not feel the benefit of connecting with these democratic values through their senses in their everyday lives.

Imagine feeling so exhausted by the stresses and strains of working in education that you can hardly stand up. You slump forward onto your desk, because otherwise you might fall. You feel disconnected, disenfranchised and demoralised. Now look at the drawing below (Figure B). For this educator, democracy feels heavy: any opportunities for participation have become mechanical, and responsibility feels burdensome. Seeing the drawing in this way reminds us that renewing democracy is not just a matter of intellectual ideals. It also requires nurturing the felt, relational, and experiential dimensions of learning that make democracy tangible, energising and shared.



**Figure B: Drawing of slumped figure**  
(Graphic recording and illustration by Johanna Benz, 2024, Marburg)

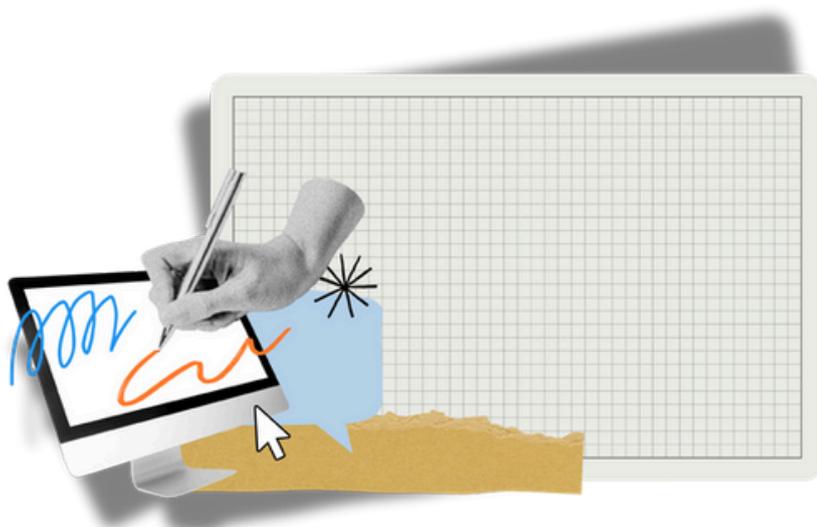
**Figure B:** This image depicts an educator slumped with exhaustion, suggesting that democratic participation can feel heavy, mechanical, or burdensome when people are overstretched. The figure supports the message that renewing democracy is not only intellectual; it also involves the felt, relational, and embodied dimensions of experience.

The AECED project research identified a range of barriers and constraints that challenge the integration and development of the kind of aesthetic and embodied learning required to promote and renew democracy. These barriers and constraints vary by national and institutional context – shaped by historical, cultural, and policy-specific conditions.

One form these constraints often take is what is commonly described as performative and neoliberal policy. Such policy measures have affected many educational institutions over the years. These measures tend to limit educators' professional discretion and innovation and to lead institutions to gauge performance through narrow, bureaucratic indicators and financial targets.

In some contexts, the effects of performative and neoliberal policy may not be felt as strongly, but rigidities in and assumptions about the curriculum are often experienced as constraining forms of education that engage imagination, feelings, emotions, movement, bodily senses, and the capacity to relate to others. Such rigidities, as well as time pressures and hierarchical decision-making structures, act as brakes on the implementation of participatory, creative and democratic pedagogies. Across the AECED participatory action research cases, many participants described everyday learning interactions shaped by hierarchy, managerial expectations, dissatisfaction, and fear, leaving them feeling unable to speak freely, take initiative, or influence educational decisions. It is evident that democratic relations in many educational institutions are often constrained by power imbalances and a lack of safe spaces for genuine and meaningful dialogue.

A profound reimagining of education is required if educational and other institutions are to authentically embrace education for democracy, and democracy itself, as a lived, embodied and aesthetic practice. Our experience of AELD shows that such reimagining can begin with small changes – such as AELD activities – which can open space for deeper transformation.



### 3. Why aesthetic and embodied learning matters for democracy



AELD provides opportunities to explore the aesthetic and embodied dimensions that are integral to a flourishing living practice of democracy. It contributes to education for democracy that goes beyond abstraction and cognitive learning. To explain the value of AELD, we summarise:

- Why the aesthetic and embodied dimensions of pedagogy are important for learning, and how they support connecting with democracy,
- What was learned from the AECED research about how AELD can promote a felt connection to democracy.

To fully appreciate how people learn, it is essential to understand the role of their aesthetic and embodied dimensions. These dimensions include experiences such as feelings, ethical and spiritual sensibilities, creative and imaginative capabilities, beauty, joy, suffering, pain and bodily senses. They evoke not only feelings and emotions, but also meaning making and felt evaluations of, for example, whether something is good or bad (even before we have put it into words). Aesthetic experiences and expressions are always embodied and relational: they happen in and through the body, and in connection with something, someone, or others.



Taking into account the interconnections between feelings, senses, movements, and thinking enables people's aesthetic and embodied dimensions to grow and flourish without a dominating emphasis on linear, logical thinking, which tends to emphasise cognitive knowledge.

Such learning is fuller and richer. The more we appreciate the aesthetic and embodied dimensions, the more we enhance our understanding of the world, ourselves, and others. Awareness and the cultivation of these dimensions are fundamental to the practice of democracy. They play a vital role in how people come to know and connect with themselves, others, and the world, and in nurturing qualities such as humility, respect, empathy, active listening, integrity, compassion, and openness to new possibilities – qualities essential to sustaining democratic life.

Findings from the AECED research indicate that AELD operates on two interconnected levels. First, it nurtures democratic qualities such as empathy, humility, attentiveness and openness. Second, and equally importantly, it provides participants with tangible experiences of both democratic and undemocratic relations in action – allowing them to sense how power, trust, responsibility, inclusion and exclusion are enacted in practice.

Research carried out as part of the AECED project shows that democracy is not only learned through discussion or reasoning – it is also felt, sensed, and lived through our bodies, relationships, and creative experiences. From research across 19 participatory action case studies in six European countries, we concluded that AELD can help people – regardless of gender, age, ability, class, or ethnic or racial background – to act democratically and support the flourishing of democratic practices. These are summarised in the next table.

**Table A. Key findings from the AECED research on AELD**

Our research has shown that AELD can:

- Cultivate qualities essential to democracy, such as empathy, active listening, and openness to otherness and new possibilities.
- Increase awareness of aesthetic and embodied senses so people know and understand themselves and the world in different ways, for example, through heightened bodily awareness.
- Encourage more democratic ways of learning and creating knowledge by embracing more open-ended, dialogic and co-constructed ways of knowing.
- Help people to understand differently how democracy can be known and understood, by exploring it aesthetically, bodily and relationally with others.
- Be a learning journey of discovery, that is, an open-ended, non-linear process of becoming, filled with possibilities.
- Enhance democratic sensibility, which includes greater awareness of feelings and bodily senses in democratic activity and connectedness with others, as well as a felt connection with democratic values and principles.



### **Learning democracy through shared movement**

In a higher education course on learning and democracy, students and educators co-created a collective dance-based project. Rather than directing the process, the educator invited participants to explore how decisions could be made together through movement, improvisation, and reflection.

At first, participants felt uncertain. Some waited for instructions, while others hesitated to take initiative. As the process unfolded, leadership began to shift fluidly. Participants learned to listen to one another, negotiate ideas, and share responsibility for the emerging work. Tensions arose when expectations differed, but these moments became occasions for collective reflection rather than failure.

By the end of the process, participants described having learned democracy not as a concept but as a lived practice. Trust, participation, care, and responsibility were experienced as necessary conditions for the work to continue. The dance functioned as a shared inquiry into how democracy works – and what it requires – when power is distributed rather than imposed.

AECED Case 10, Adult Education, Organisational and Professional Learning, Germany

### **Situating AELD within European democratic education frameworks**

Across Europe, growing concern about democratic fragility has led to renewed attention to education's role in sustaining democratic life. This concern is reflected in a range of European policy frameworks and initiatives that emphasise active citizenship, participation, inclusion, and democratic culture. Notably, the Council of Europe has advanced a comprehensive understanding of democratic competence through its Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, foregrounding values, attitudes, skills, knowledge, and critical understanding as essential for democratic participation.

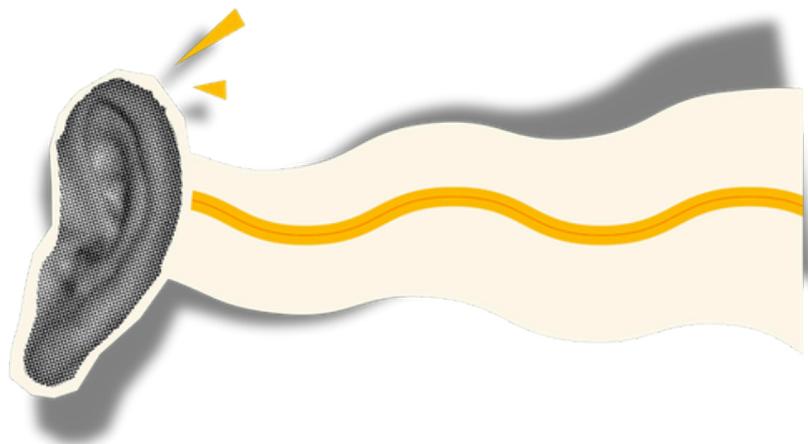
Similarly, within the European Union, initiatives linked to the European Education Area and policy documents on citizenship education and participation highlight the importance of learner agency, inclusion, and engagement with democratic processes.

While existing frameworks provide crucial normative and policy orientations, they tend to focus primarily on the cognitive, discursive, and institutional dimensions of democratic learning. Within European debates on the future of democracy and education, however, there are growing calls for forms of learning that move beyond information transfer and procedural participation, and that attend more seriously to experience, relation, and meaning-making. The AECED Framework builds on and complements these approaches by foregrounding the aesthetic, embodied, relational, and affective dimensions of education for democracy. On the future of democracy and education, there are growing calls for forms of learning that move beyond information transfer and procedural participation, and that attend more seriously to experience, relation, and meaning-making. The AECED research suggests that AELD responds to these calls by working at the level where democratic life is actually formed: in how people sense, feel, relate, and act together. Drawing on participatory action research across diverse educational contexts, the project indicates that aesthetic and embodied pedagogical approaches can support democratic learning by cultivating relational qualities, expanding ways of knowing, and enabling more dialogic and co-constructed forms of educational practice.

In this way, AELD does not offer a technical solution to democratic challenges, but contributes to wider European efforts to reimagine education for democracy as a lived, experiential, and relational process.

In this sense, AELD does not stand apart from existing European frameworks, but contributes a distinctive pedagogical perspective: one that emphasises democracy as something to be experienced, sensed, and enacted in educational practice, rather than only understood or discussed.

We conclude this section by sharing an example of an AELD exercise below that illustrates one way AELD can enrich education for democracy.





*We step out of the campus hall into the yard. The students chatter, but I ask them to pause social talk and tune into the journey – listening to the surroundings, noticing feelings, tensions, thoughts. Feeling their feet on pavement, then gravel, then the soft forest floor. We walk in silence into the woods behind the university. I sense dew underfoot, smell wet soil. Birds call from the pond beyond the trees. Boots scratch, clothes shuffle. I hear my own breath, and theirs.*

*In a small clearing, we form a circle. From my backpack, I take a ball of yarn. I hand it to the first student and say to them: share one insight from your thesis, another from your peer's – keep hold of the string as you pass the ball on.*

*One by one, we become connected – threads stretching across the clearing as reflections weave between us.*

*Sometimes we tangle. We crouch, bend, reach to untangle and pass the yarn. We learn not to pull the yarn too tight, nor let it drag so that connection fades. When the ball falls, we pick it up. In this web of yarn, participation, co-construction and collective decision-making become tangible: the journey we share, the knowledge gathered, the solidarity and challenges faced.*

*When the circle is complete, one more task begins: to move as one from the woods back to the campus, keeping the network intact. We negotiate –verbally, silently. How to walk a narrow path without someone falling? How to match pace, fit through a doorway? Finally, we are inside. Time to let go of the yarn – but hold on to the ties that bind us.*

*This journey taught us that democratic learning is not confined to dialogue –it emerges through embodied practices, shared movement, and affective atmospheres, in the rhythm of bodies and the weight of yarn between hands. Students felt belonging, mutual responsibility, and freedom of expression. The yarn made visible what is often unseen: interdependence, care, and the fragile strength of connection, fostering power-sharing and relational wellbeing. Democracy in education is lived, negotiated, and co-created – felt in bodies as much as spoken in words. Something we could touch, carry and move through together.*

AECED Case 5, Higher Education, Finland

## 4. Defining aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy



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 has a crucial role to play in ensuring education for democracy is much more than a process of learning dominated by abstractions, cognitive learning and linear, rationalistic thinking.

### **The purpose of AELD**

Its purpose is to integrate feeling, movement, imagination, co-creation and attention to care into education for democracy; to foster shared meaning-making, responsibility and empathy; and to strengthen a sense of social and ecological interconnection and awareness that recognises human interdependence with the environment. In essence, AELD seeks to cultivate a personal and shared sense of democracy, described in this framework as democratic sensibility.

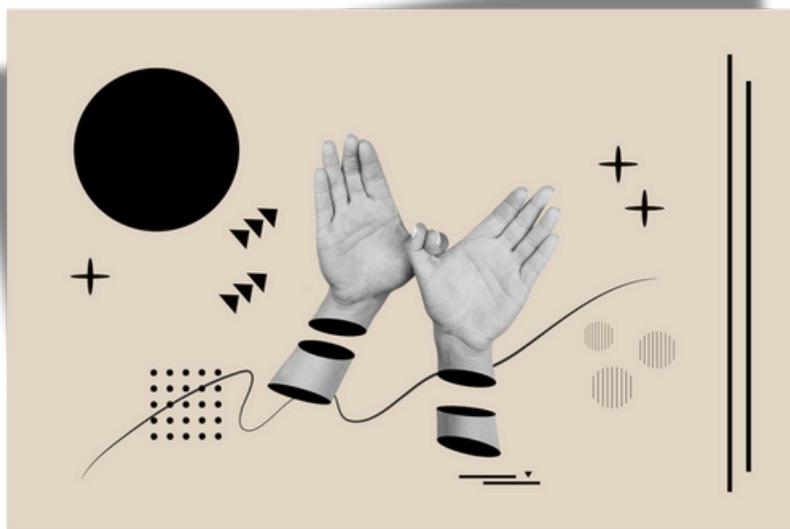
### **The central focus of AELD**

AELD is a way of learning that engages the whole body in processes of shared meaning-making and co-creation. It takes into account not only the development of linear and logical thinking, which tends to emphasise cognitive knowledge, but also gives particular attention to emotions, feelings, sensations and bodily movements, as well as creative, imaginative and other capacities.

AELD values aesthetic and embodied experience – moments of beauty, disruption, confusion, wonder, emotion – as catalysts for understanding and transformation. The focus of AELD is on how people create democracy through bodily activity and through the creative and reflective practices that aesthetic and embodied pedagogies make possible. These methods aim to foster understanding of learning as a collective endeavour, where care for others is valued. AELD emphasises that democracy needs to be experienced at the personal level, in day to day educational encounters, to become fully embodied and to appreciate the importance of each person participating in the co creation of democracy.

### **The aims of AELD**

A key aim of AELD is to create educational experiences where democracy is not simply a topic to be taught but a living, collective experience. Table B sets out more specific aims of AELD. These aims are based on insights from our research and further elaborate upon the key findings, summarised in Table A in Section 2.



## Table B. Aims of AELD

To:

- **cultivate democratic qualities** — that is, qualities essential to democracy such as humility, respect, curiosity, empathy, active listening, collective responsibility and openness to otherness and new possibilities.
- **increase aesthetic-embodied awareness** — that is, aesthetic and embodied senses so people know and understand themselves and the world in different ways; through, for example, drawing upon bodily awareness, learning to trust bodily intuition and learning to take notice of emotions and relational presence.
- **encourage democratic ways of learning and creating knowledge** — by moving from rigid, hierarchical models of knowledge transmission towards more open-ended, dialogic and co-constructed ways of knowing; this can extend to tackling existing hierarchies in education and empowering both students and teachers for co-creation.
- **connect with democracy holistically** — by helping educators and learners to understand differently how democracy can be known and understood, through enhancing appreciation of the value of moving beyond a purely cognitive engagement with democracy to exploring it aesthetically, bodily and relationally with others; this can be part of promoting and advancing holistic learning by integrating cognitive, emotional and embodied dimensions of people and their learning.

- **be a learning journey of discovery, filled with possibilities** – one which is an open-ended, non-linear process of becoming in which participants create possibilities that are unexpected; this includes moving beyond fixed ideas and being open to “seeing” the other and surroundings anew, as well as wider transformations of self, relationships, institutions and society through dialogue, creativity and imagination.
- **cultivate heightened democratic sensibility** – that is, enhanced awareness and appreciation of the feelings, bodily senses and human qualities that are important in democratic activity; of connectedness with others; and of democratic values and principles – as well as greater openness to learning from and with others and to the opportunities this creates for new insights, feelings and ideas.

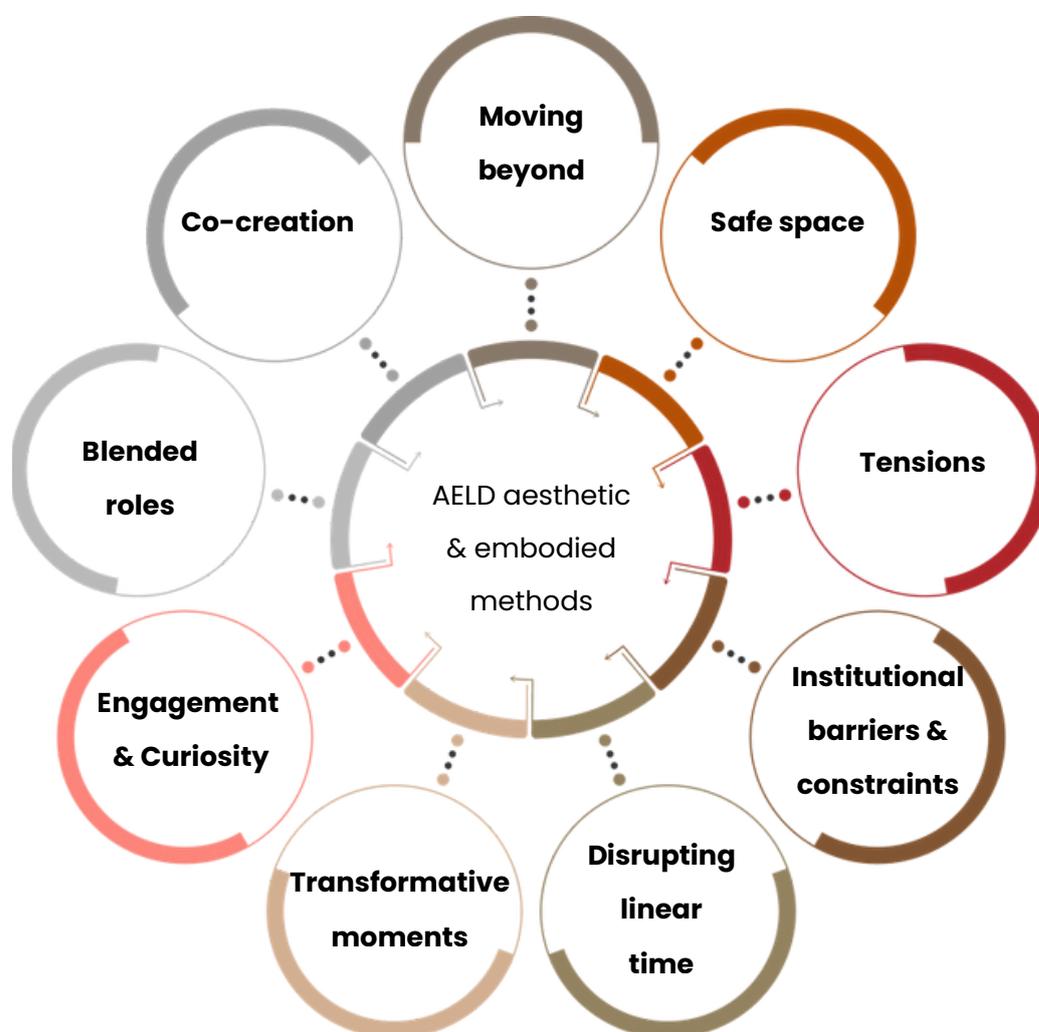
In summary, Table B shows that AELD aims to develop democratic qualities and participation by integrating cognitive, emotional, relational and embodied learning – not treating them separately.

### **The practice of AELD**

AELD practices bring learning to life through the body, imagination and relationships. They engage the body and senses, allowing movement, gesture, voice and visual expression to become ways of knowing that make learning tangible and felt. Through imagination and creativity, participants express ideas by creating drawings, dances, stories, or sounds, discovering new perspectives on themselves and others. Arts based activities and movement foster dialogue and reflection, offering shared languages through which people can explore relationships, power, and participation.

Learning in AELD is co-created, as facilitators and participants share responsibility, build trust and shape knowledge together. In this way, AELD connects learning with democratic values. Responsiveness, equality, equity, and freedom are not only discussed but also enacted, turning educational spaces into living examples of democracy in practice.

Figure C shows key characteristics of AELD practices identified from our research, and illustrates how aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods enable and operationalise these characteristics.



AELD aesthetic & embodied methods → enable / activate / operationalise → AELD characteristics

**Figure C: Characteristics of AELD and their enabling pedagogical methods**

**Figure C:** The diagram links aesthetic and embodied methods (for example: movement, dialogue, creative expression, sensory and reflective practices) to key characteristics of AELD. It shows that these methods help activate and sustain democratic learning qualities such as co-creation, blended roles, engagement and curiosity, transformative moments, disrupting linear time, working with tensions, creating safe-enough spaces, and navigating institutional barriers and constraints.

Aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods are not about producing art objects or putting on performances, but about learning through creative processes – opening spaces where people can listen, imagine and co-create. Examples include:

- Collage, drawing, painting and photography – to express perceptions and emotions visually
- Movement, dance, and drama – to explore relationships, identity, and cooperation through the body
- Storytelling, poetry and reflective writing– to articulate meaning and connect experiences
- Sound, rhythm and performance – to engage attention, emotion, and collective expression
- Mindful or sensory exercises – to deepen awareness of self, others, and environment

These methods are the practical means through which the characteristics in Figure C are enabled and enacted in practice.

### **Co-creation**

This emphasises the role of collaboration in developing AELD, not just as a pedagogical method, but as a democratic practice in itself. All participants contribute to and learn from shared activities, discussions and experiences.

### **Blended roles**

The roles of participants in AELD are typically fluid, with, for example, learners not positioned as subjects to be taught but as knowledgeable and creative agents, and educators being also learners.

### **Engagement and curiosity**

This refers to having an active, enquiring approach in designing and participating in activities —being attentive, open to new experiences, and willing to explore ideas, sensations, and relationships.



### **Transformative moments**

This involves seeking change, development and transformation, not as something delivered from above but as something that is co created through embodied engagement, critical dialogue and reflection. Aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods, by engaging the body, imagination and emotion, facilitate this process by allowing participants to momentarily step into new roles, voices and stories – enabling them to experience alternative realities in which they are more focused, more confident and more empowered.

### **Disrupting conventional linear time**

In many education settings, time is organised as a straight line: lessons follow a tight schedule, learning is broken into steps, and progress is measured by “covering content” quickly. In AELD, time is used differently. It makes room for free time for learning: time that isn’t rushed or tightly scripted, so learners can pause, notice, feel, question, and reflect. This allows dialogue and deeper meaning making, and it supports the ongoing reshaping of ideas and assumptions – not just completing a task by the end of a lesson.

### **Tensions**

Tensions are inherent to the exploration and development of AELD, reflecting the complexity of democratic educational practice. They often emerge between expectations and lived realities, at both personal and institutional levels, and between the desire for structure and the desire for creativity.

### **Institutional barriers and constraints**

Institutional barriers and constraints shape the conditions under which AELD can be developed and sustained. While their forms vary across national and institutional contexts, such constraints commonly reflect historical, cultural, and policy-specific conditions that limit pedagogical innovation. This characteristic highlights how institutional structures can hinder democratic transformation, particularly when education seeks to work through aesthetic, embodied, and relational approaches.

### **Safe space**

It is important that AELD takes place in spaces that feel safe and supportive for AELD participants, where they have a sense of belonging. At the heart of AELD lies what we might call a pedagogy of care – a way of working that pays close attention to emotional safety, relational ethics and embodied presence.

### **Moving beyond**

AELD is designed to foster learning as an open-ended, non-linear process of becoming, marked by transformation, uncertainty and reflection on identity. Rather than pre-determined outcomes, AELD encourages openness to new possibilities that emerge through democratic relations. It encourages movement beyond both internal and external limitations: beyond inherited educational norms, beyond inherited power relations (based on gender, age, race etc.), beyond structural constraints, and beyond what participants initially perceive as possible. This movement is supported by embodied, emotional and imaginative practices that disrupt the boundaries of self and context.

## **Where AELD can be practised**

There is potential for the practice of AELD wherever education for democracy takes place – including schools, colleges, universities, cultural institutions, workplaces, and community spaces. Where AELD is already being used, there is scope to build on and extend existing practice.

### **Safe space and relational well-being**

In a professional learning workshop, educators and organisational practitioners explored democracy-as-becoming through visual and embodied methods. Some participants initially expressed discomfort, worrying about exposure or judgement when working beyond familiar discussion-based formats.

Facilitators slowed the process, prioritising attentiveness to participants' embodied responses. Simple grounding activities were introduced, and participation remained voluntary. Over time, participants reported feeling increasingly safe to engage – to move, speak, or remain silent without pressure.

As trust developed, the group began addressing sensitive themes such as hierarchy, exclusion, and power in their own organisations. Participants described how being met with acceptance rather than evaluation – later conceptualised as the *acceptive gaze* – enabled deeper engagement.

The experience highlighted that relational safety is not an add-on to democratic learning, but a democratic practice in itself. Feeling safe enough to participate differently allowed new forms of agency and mutual responsibility to emerge.

AECED Case 10, Higher Education and Adult Education, Organisational and Professional Learning, Germany



## 5. Core ideas underpinning AELD



Here, we explain key ideas to help you understand AELD. This includes what we mean by democracy-as-becoming, as well as ideas concerning democratic values, democratic principles, responsive pedagogy, democratic sensibility, and the acceptive gaze. Each of these is explained in turn.

### **Democracy-as-becoming**

AELD is grounded in the idea of democracy-as-becoming.

By democracy-as-becoming, we mean the understanding that democracy is never finished. It is not just a political system, an organisational form of governance, or a set of rules, but a living process that is continually in motion through our actions, relationships, and learning. In this view, democracy is seen as an aspiration in any day to day interaction which aims at fostering participation in shaping the social and organisational environment and decisions that affect us, as well as advancing freedom, equality, equity, and responsiveness.

Nobody can create democracy alone. It is a joint exercise in which individual actions interconnect with those of others. The democratic value of responsiveness (discussed below), for example, can only be fully understood by recognising that its enactment involves bodily responses and messages between people. These bodily responses and messages help shape the extent to which a group or organisation's culture and relationships are democratic. Embodied interactions affect how others feel about themselves, whether they feel included or excluded, equal or unequal, free or not to express themselves.

It is crucial to recognise that people in democracy do not just interact cognitively through language – that is, in discussion, debate and writing. People also communicate through bodily messages they send and receive; they convey how they feel and respond to how others express their feelings. Democracy is a process of becoming because it emerges from a continuous, complex process of interaction in which human agency both shapes and is conditioned by the relationships in which people are an integral part.

Bringing democratic practices into education is therefore not only about teaching about democracy but also about learning together through them, by practising and reflecting on them in the classroom and other learning environments.



### **Non-linear learning and “moving beyond”**

In a secondary school, students and teachers engaged in AELD activities combining drama, collage, and reflective dialogue. Early sessions felt fragmented. Some students were engaged, while others questioned the relevance of creative approaches to learning about democracy.

Progress was uneven. Moments of enthusiasm were followed by resistance or withdrawal. Rather than correcting the process, teacher facilitators encouraged participants to remain with the uncertainty and continue reflecting together.

Gradually, earlier experiences resurfaced in new ways. A collage created weeks before informed later discussions on fairness. A dramatic sketch that initially seemed playful became a reference point for conversations about voice and exclusion. Learning unfolded through revisiting and reinterpreting experiences, rather than moving step by step.

Participants came to recognise that democratic learning is non-linear. It develops over time, through repetition and relational engagement – mirroring democracy as-becoming as an ongoing, unfinished process.

## **Democratic values**

At the heart of AELD are the core democratic values of:

- freedom
- equality and equity
- responsiveness

These values are essential for promoting human dignity, human rights, respect, and acceptance of cultural diversity in all its forms – including the intersecting dimensions of gender, race, age, ability, socioeconomic background, and other identities. They also support participation, justice, fairness and equal opportunities. In embodying these values, AELD aims to foster an oppression-free, trusting, and inclusive environment for people.

The Framework foregrounds these democratic values – freedom, equality and equity, and responsiveness – not as an exhaustive list, but because these values repeatedly emerged in the AECED research as foundational for democratic relations in educational practice. Other democratic values are not excluded; rather, these three function as generative anchors through which additional values and practices can be explored.

## **Freedom**

Freedom means creating spaces where participants can explore, imagine, and express themselves openly, in ways that are anti-oppressive and do no harm to others' freedom. It means building an environment that dismantles oppression, bullying, or victimising behaviour, and encourages openness to oneself and others. Freedom, as part of education for democracy, is about creating opportunities to deepen understanding that our freedom is based on the freedom of others and is not the freedom of the isolated individual.

## **Equality and Equity**

The value of equality and equity reflects the principle that, based on the recognition that everyone is valued and that everyone's voice, body, and experience matter, no one, in principle, is excluded from participation. Equality requires that each receives the same as everyone else: for example, that educators and participants in education for democracy are all provided with the same rights and responsibilities regardless of their socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds, such as gender, age or ethnic identity. Equity requires that each receives what they need to enable them to enjoy equal opportunity: for example, this may mean varying the resources and support some receive in order to counter the unequal effects of different socio-cultural backgrounds, gender, nationalities, racialised identities, age and physical capabilities, that position participants in education for democracy differently in regard to power-sharing in educational interactions. Equity concerns mean providing every participant with the resources and support they need to succeed, regardless of their background. Exploration of equity can include co-creation of opportunities to reflect on hierarchies of power and authority, and on which hierarchies should be challenged.

In education for democracy, taking equality and equity seriously means creating opportunities to reflect on inequalities, exploring ways to address them, and seeking possibilities for all participants – educators and learners alike – to support and empower one another.



### **Inequality, gender and embodied awareness**

In an online teacher education course, early years and primary educators explored democracy using aesthetic and embodied activities adapted to digital settings. One activity invited participants to reflect on their teaching practices through images and simple movement prompts.

During reflection, several educators became aware of how gendered expectations shaped classroom interactions – who spoke, who mediated conflict, and who carried emotional labour. These patterns were often recognised with discomfort, including participants' own roles in reproducing them.

Small-group discussions revealed common patterns across different participant roles and settings (e.g., similar moments of hesitation, self-censorship, or uncertainty when talking about inequality). Several participants said the online setting felt safer because it offered more control over how to participate (for example, taking time to think, using chat, or speaking without the same visibility and immediate judgement as in a physical room).

Participants also noted that embodied reflection helped them sense inequality not only as an abstract issue, but as something lived through everyday gestures, roles, and expectations. Rather than offering solutions, the process fostered critical awareness: it supported educators in recognising how inequality is enacted in practice and opened space for imagining more equitable relations.

AECED Case 16, Adult, Professional and Organisational Learning, Portugal

## **Responsiveness**

Responsiveness means not only participation in discussions but being attentive to bodily responses as part of embodied agency. It means holistic listening – listening to others with the whole body. Being responsive means co-creating safe spaces to learn together, thereby making collective efforts to create safe teaching and learning spaces where learners and educators co-think, co-work, and co-become by caring for each other. Responsiveness includes creating opportunities to deepen situational sensitivity and responsiveness to the diversity of local cultures, places, social identities, policies, power, and empowerment. One practice for cultivating responsiveness in education for democracy is fostering interaction and reflection.

## **Interconnecting values**

All these values overlap. For example, freedom needs to take equality and equity into account by being responsive and empathetic toward others. We consider these values not only as abstract concepts but also as embodied activities or skills that manifest in our daily practices and can be cultivated. Once we understand how these values emerge or are overlooked in our reciprocal embodied encounters, we can learn to further develop them through bodily practices.

## **Democratic principles**

These principles aim to describe what it means to practise democracy as becoming. There are four principles that we believe are helpful in understanding democracy-as-becoming. They have helped us by providing theoretical foundations on which to build AELD. The four are:

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

These are also sometimes referred to as the dimensions of democracy, as they tell us what the practice of democracy needs and should involve. They are, therefore, propositions that offer a guide for action in the creation of democracy as a process of becoming. They are not prescriptive instructions to practice, but are better seen as suggested commitments that educators, learners, policy actors and institutions can interpret in their own contexts.

## **Power sharing**

Power sharing is about the active involvement of people in shaping the institutions, culture, and relationships that make up their social and organisational environment. It's about having a say in decisions and having some means of holding power holders to account. Power sharing involves participants being able to exercise freedom to act, feel and think. This includes taking the initiative to create new possibilities. Freedom is not absolute. Some actions, for example, may be framed or limited by shared rules and conventions.

Power sharing does not imply the absence of structure, shared rules or responsibility. On the contrary, democratic practice depends on shared norms and on individuals – including educators – being willing to take responsibility for creating and sustaining safe, trusting and fair learning environments. In educational contexts, learners' freedom is often made possible precisely because educators carry particular responsibilities, including intervening when necessary to protect relational well-being.

## **Transforming dialogue**

The principle of transforming dialogue involves exchanging and exploring views, engaging in debate, and advancing mutual understanding. Certain features are crucial in order for dialogue to be transformative. For example, it needs to be conducted with mutual respect for participants and for diverse viewpoints, including perspectives that may feel challenging. It requires active listening to all viewpoints expressed. It is also helpful if dialogue is approached with the explicit intention of increasing mutual understanding, encouraging constructive critique, and reaching beyond narrow personal or group interests.

Transforming dialogue benefits from openness to reflection about what we are experiencing, the things being said to us in the dialogue, and how we feel about it all, and a willingness to give ourselves time to consider whether we agree or not, rather than rushing to an automatic judgement. Important too is how we communicate with others – both through the language we use and in our bodily communications (that is, the bodily messages that we all send and receive, as discussed in relation to democracy-as-becoming above).

### **Holistic learning**

The third principle is holistic learning. In a holistic and rich view of democracy, people's growth and development benefit from the participation, collaboration and dialogue that are integral to democracy. The holistic learning that is nurtured within democratic practice characterised by all four principles involves the growth of people in all their human potential – that is, not only linear thinking emphasising cognitive knowledge and skills, but also awareness, sensitivity and appreciation in relation to such areas of experience as feelings, ethical and spiritual sensibilities, beauty, joy, pain, suffering – and our awareness and understanding of bodily senses. The aspiration of this kind of democracy is the growth of the whole person and community. Hence, it is sometimes referred to as holistic democracy.

### **Relational well-being**

Relational well-being is about the kind of relationship that exists between people, community and the wider environment. Democratic relationships and communities at their best foster a sense of social cohesion, high self-esteem, and a sense of belonging with others and with the environment we all share. They nurture a sense of connection with other people and the natural world, and a capacity for and openness to experiences that energise, uplift, and sometimes challenge people. As well as belonging, a democratic community fosters feelings of empowerment and respect for individuality, difference and the capacity to think for oneself. Democracy creates a context that nurtures a sense of agency and belonging.

These dimensions interact with each other. They don't stand alone and separate. They are ideal aspirations. The extent to which one or more are developed and become part of practice will vary between contexts and as a result of the effects and interplay of everyday influences – such as local and personal histories and cultural and institutional factors. These factors may include shared experiences of democracy and social characteristics such as status, privilege, inequalities and access to education. The four dimensions of power sharing, transforming dialogue, holistic learning and relational well-being offer a framework for exploring and developing how relationships and practices can become more democratic.

### **Responsive pedagogy**

Responsive pedagogy highlights the practice of education that gives expression to socialisation as a more complex process than moulding into predetermined, uniform orders, and where people not only understand themselves in different ways but are also involved physically, as bodies that feel, sense, and move. Responsive pedagogy seeks to give practical effect to the active role of both educators and learners, emphasising 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 wider context – including history, place, policy, and social positioning such as gender, class, and racial or ethnic identity.

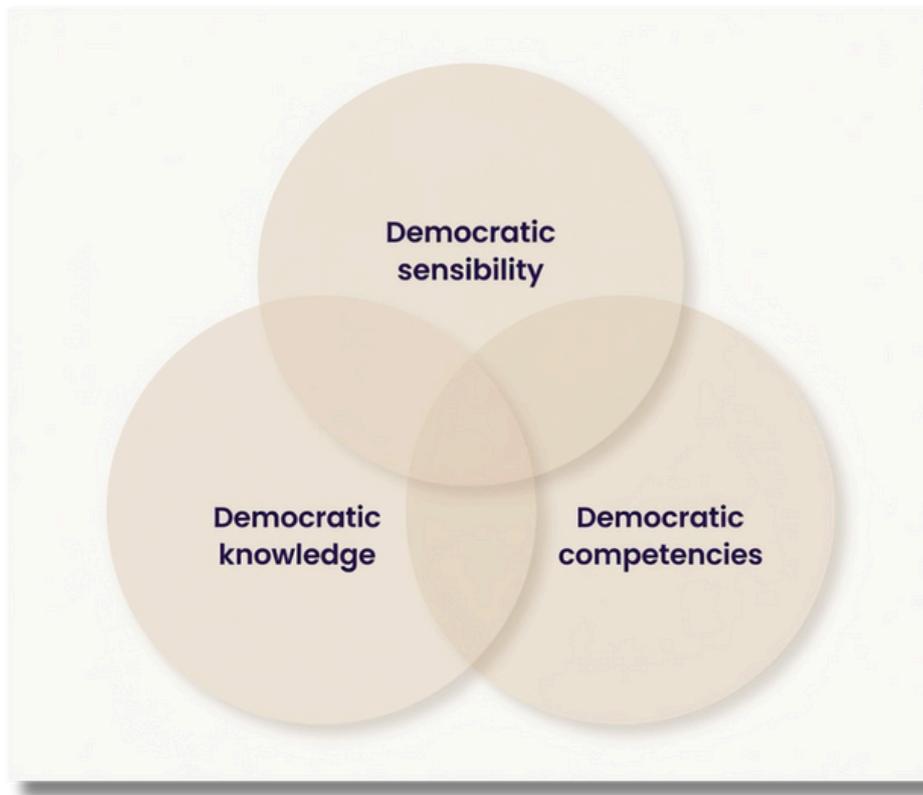
Let's explain this a little more fully. Responsive pedagogy in AELD involves responsiveness to five interrelated aspects of education, namely:

- 1.** Education as a shared endeavour that involves shared responsibility. This means that learning is not practised as a one-way route from educator to learner. Educational relationships and learning are co-created through the joint activities and interactions of educators, learners, community, families and other stakeholders.
- 2.** Education as a continual flow of reciprocal learning. This means exercising a caring attitude toward one's own and others' feelings and embodied reactions, and creating together educational spaces that are as safe and conducive to shared growth as possible.
- 3.** Embodied responses considered as integral to the process of learning. These responses are reflected in how they impact upon ourselves and the process of learning. The reciprocity of the embodied responses is acknowledged by understanding that others are equally affected by their embodied responses.
- 4.** Being alert to contextual factors and responding to circumstances and what these mean to those involved in educational activities and interactions. A complex set of factors makes up such circumstances and context and include cultures, history, place, policy and social positioning in terms of gender, social class, race, and so on, and the ways in which they intersect with each other. This intermixing of social factors constituting inequalities (intersectionality) can have important implications for different people's experiences of democratic values and principles and the degree to which as participants in AELD they feel they have agency and are included, treated equally and responded to.
- 5.** Possibilities of transcending the fixedness of 'mine' and 'yours'. Understanding how each of us is connected to others through reciprocal embodied responses and how this opens up possibilities of experiencing collective learning situations as co-constructed and fluid and as transcending of the individualistic boundaries that separate us.

## **Democratic sensibility**

Education for democracy includes learning about democracy (its institutions and practices, human rights, inequalities, social justice, and other matters), as well as democratic skills (such as people's capabilities to initiate, engage with, or respond to democratic activity). However, it is not only about knowledge and skills.

To participate in and value democracy, it is important to develop an appreciation of its values and principles. This appreciation arises not only through thought, but also through lived and felt experience – through our bodily senses and the interconnection of emotions, feelings, and bodily movements, all of which shape how we create democratic relations in action. These aesthetic and embodied dimensions of appreciating and feeling democracy constitute a kind of sensibility which we call democratic sensibility. Figure D shows the different aspects of education for democracy.



**Figure D: Democratic sensibility in the context of other key aspects of education for democracy**

**Figure D:** This Venn-style diagram presents three interrelated aspects of education for democracy: democratic knowledge (understanding democracy), democratic competencies (skills and capabilities for democratic participation), and democratic sensibility (attentiveness to lived, felt, relational and embodied dimensions of democratic life). It suggests these aspects overlap and reinforce one another, rather than functioning as separate domains.

What, then, is democratic sensibility? 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.

The defining elements of democratic sensibility comprise:

- Aesthetic-embodied awareness – an appreciation of and sensitivity to the aesthetic-embodied dimension of being human and an ability to learn from this in order to respond to others and act more democratically
- Connectedness – an awareness of and felt relatedness with our self, with others and the world of which we are an interconnected part, encompassing self-oriented awareness, other-oriented awareness and antipathy towards injustices. Connectedness can contribute to developing sensitivity to injustice, particularly when combined with opportunities for critical reflection and learning about social, historical and political contexts.
- Qualities exercised in the practice of a flourishing democracy – including attributes such as humility, respect, empathy, active listening, integrity and compassion
- A feel for democracy that involves feelings of appreciation towards
  - democratic values – a felt sense of the value of freedom, equality and equity, and responsiveness
  - democratic principles – felt orientations towards power sharing, transformative dialogue, holistic learning, and relational well-being, involving a sense of value and meaning in relation to the ideas and practices these principles embody.

## **Acceptive gaze**

AELD benefits from and cultivates what we call the acceptive gaze – a way of seeing and receiving the world without domination or judgement. It means looking at oneself, others and the environment with openness, respect and curiosity, rather than trying to control or categorise. Practising the acceptive gaze as a collective agreement to look at one's and others' responses in an acceptive way paves the way for safer learning environments. This is important, especially when responses to aesthetic and embodied activities might evoke more challenging or possibly deeper kinds of vulnerability than when engaging with more familiar forms of learning with a greater cognitive focus. AELD touches immediately the personal, hidden layers of us, which can become too intimidating and overwhelming if the potential for vulnerability is not taken into account.

The acceptive gaze aims to set aside prejudices and assumptions about oneself and others. It can be seen, therefore, as an ethical way of perceiving, through which freedom, equality and equity are more likely to become embodied realities. Practising the acceptive gaze is a conscious choice to become more responsive to what is happening in ourselves and, at the same time, more open and non-judgemental towards ourselves and others. Embodying the acceptive gaze does not mean that everything is accepted as is, but everything that emerges in each encounter is faced with empathic evaluation. The acceptive gaze is therefore a constructive element that contributes towards creating spaces that are safe enough for democratic ways of acting, deliberating and learning together.

## 6. Audiences and contexts for AELD



AELD is for anyone engaged in education and collective learning – from early childhood to adulthood, across formal, non-formal and informal settings.

It speaks especially to the following groups:

- Educators – in schools, colleges, universities, adult learning, and cultural or community settings.
- Teacher educators, facilitators and counsellors – supporting adult, professional and organisational learning, guidance, and pedagogical renewal.
- Organisational leaders and managers – shaping the cultures and structures of learning institutions.
- Policy actors, curriculum designers and decision-makers – creating enabling conditions for AELD to flourish.
- Researchers and artists – exploring and co-creating new ways of understanding and enacting democracy through education.

AELD thus belongs to a broad community of democratic practice, connecting people who care about how learning can sustain, renew and cultivate a feel for democracy.

Whether AELD is already part of practice or is new to readers, the Framework can be used for reflection, development, and extension. It may be useful for those seeking to deepen existing approaches and also serve as an entry point for exploring AELD for the first time.

Our invitation to educators, teacher educators and facilitators of adult, professional and organisational learning is

- Be innovative where AELD already exists. Experiment with new connections between aesthetic experience and democratic participation.
- Introduce AELD where it is not yet used. Try small, creative, and embodied activities – for example, movement, drawing, story making or shared reflection – that invite learners to feel democracy and explore ideas together.
- Reflect and share. Notice what changes when learning becomes more sensory, relational and open-ended – including how people listen, participate, and share power – and share those discoveries with others.

To educational organisations and leaders

- Support AELD as part of your culture. Create time and space for experimentation, collaboration, and reflection within your teams.
- Remove barriers. Value embodied, creative, aesthetic and embodied approaches as legitimate forms of professional and pedagogical practice for democracy.
- Model democratic leadership. Encourage listening, participation and shared responsibility across your organisation.

To policy makers and curriculum designers

- Recognise the importance of aesthetic and embodied learning in democracy. Embed it within curricula, policy frameworks and funding priorities.
- Enable rather than constrain. Design policies for AELD that trust educators' creativity and professional judgement.
- Promote democracy and policies for education for democracy through participation. Develop educational policies through dialogue with educators and learners.

For researchers and artists

- Deepen and document understanding of AELD. Explore how aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods reveal new democratic insights.
- Collaborate with educators and communities. Build partnerships that bring artistic, pedagogical, civic, learners' and democratic perspectives into dialogue.



## **Institutional barriers and responsibility**

In a secondary school, a teacher introduced AELD activities within a tightly regulated curriculum and accountability-driven environment. Integrating embodied and dialogic practices involved professional risk, and not all colleagues were supportive.

Early sessions were challenging. Students tested boundaries, and moments of disorder emerged. Rather than abandoning the approach, the teacher clarified shared expectations and took responsibility for maintaining a safe learning environment.

Over time, students became more willing to take responsibility for themselves – listening more attentively, supporting peers, and reflecting on how their actions affected others. Power sharing developed alongside a clear structure, not in its absence.

The experience demonstrated that AELD does not remove authority or rules. Instead, it reshapes how responsibility is exercised, showing that democratic relations in education depend on both shared agency and accountable leadership.

AECED Case 19, Secondary Education, United Kingdom

## **The shared invitation**

No matter their role, everyone who works with learning can:

- **Explore** – by experimenting with AELD in their own contexts.
- **Expand** – by connecting with others and sharing experiences.
- **Support** – by removing obstacles and advocating for aesthetic and embodied learning as a crucial part of education for democracy.

AELD is both a concept and a movement. It grows wherever people create conditions for learning that are responsive, relational, imaginative and equitable.



## 7. Adapting AELD across local, national and cultural contexts

AELD is not a fixed model. It advocates a flexible pedagogical approach that can be tailored to any learning setting, such as schools, colleges, universities, non-profit or other organisations, or community spaces. Educators can adapt AELD to reflect their communities, stories, traditions, culture and context.

AELD is about how we learn together, not about following one method. Central to AELD are diversity, imagination and responsiveness, qualities that allow it to take different forms in different contexts while keeping the same purpose: to integrate into education for democracy, feeling, movement, imagination, co-creation, attention to care and shared meaning-making and to cultivate a personal and shared feel for democracy – that is, a democratic sensibility.

The AECED project tested and refined AELD across six European countries. While this provided substantial experience in adapting AELD across diverse European contexts, further work would be required to explore how AELD translates into non-European or significantly different cultural, religious or socio-political contexts.

## **Why adaptation matters**

Democracy looks and feels different across cultures, languages and histories. Traditions and experiences of aesthetic and embodied activities and learning differ across people and communities. Different too is how early years, primary and higher education, and adult, professional, and organisational learning are governed and organised across differing contexts.

What remains constant is the need for participation, voice, care and shared learning.

AELD works best when it grows from local roots – when, for example, it draws on:

- local cultures, stories, songs and movements that people already know and trust.
- the rhythms, policies, and traditions of local educational systems.
- the specific needs, challenges and strengths of the communities, contexts and organisations in which it is being practised.

Adaptation is not a compromise; it keeps AELD alive and relevant – but it requires dialogue and cultural sensitivity.

When educators work with local practices and cultural materials, learning becomes more meaningful, and democratic values and principles are experienced as authentic, relevant and shared.

## **What adaptation looks like**

Adapting AELD can mean:

- choosing creative forms that hold local meaning, such as theatre, crafts, storytelling, dance, digital art or nature-based activity.
- adjusting time, group size or space to fit everyday practicalities.
- linking AELD principles with existing curricula, institutional goals or community values.
- co-creating activities with learners, educators, leaders and communities that reflect their lived experiences.

The key is to engage with democratic principles – power sharing, transforming dialogue, holistic learning and relational well-being – while allowing them to take shape naturally in each context.

## **How do we know AELD is adaptable?**

Research from the six partner institutions in the AECED project showed that AELD thrives across different settings: from outdoor and experiential settings to traditional classrooms, organisational development workshops, teacher education, and adult learning spaces. Each context faced distinct challenges, yet when the principles were honoured, AELD consistently generated connection, curiosity and care.

Even in systems shaped by standardisation or limited resources, educators found small but powerful ways to bring AELD to life through trust, shared exploration and creative action.

## 8. From framework to practice



This Framework is not an endpoint – it is an invitation to begin and continue the journey.

It invites you – as an educator, teacher educator, facilitator of adult, professional and organisational learning, leader, manager, policymaker, curriculum designer, decision-maker, researcher or artist – to take the ideas of AELD and bring them to life in your own context.

You are not being encouraged to follow a fixed method. Instead, you are invited to experiment, reflect and adapt – to explore what happens when education for democracy becomes more aesthetic and embodied, more imaginative, and relational.

### **Ways forward**

You may come away from engaging with the Framework with:

- inspiration – to reflect on your current practices and imagine new, more democratic, more aesthetic and embodied ways of engaging learners and helping them connect with democracy.
- curiosity – to follow up and explore in greater depth the values, principles and ideas introduced in the Framework that are the cornerstones underpinning AELD and which give it meaning.
- motivation to make practical change – to create a bridge between what you have gained from engaging with the Framework and the potential for enhancing or introducing AELD in your own practice or institution.

**Review this in the Framework** — Use this table to decide where to begin.

Then move to the Guide for practical steps, examples, and tools.

If you are...	Start here in the Framework	Where next?	What you'll get
<b>Educator (any phase / any setting)</b>	Sections 3–4 (what AELD is + core ideas) + Section 6 (adapting across contexts)	The Guide for your phase (Early/Primary; Secondary; Higher; Adult/Professional/Organisational)	Practical activity examples, reflection prompts, and ideas for adapting AELD to your local context
<b>Teacher educator / facilitator / counsellor</b>	Section 4 (core ideas) + Acceptive gaze (creating “safe-enough” conditions for participation)	Phase Guide + guide companion for additional resources	Facilitation-ready pathways, prompts for reflection/experimentation, and ways to support groups across comfort levels
<b>Organisational leader/ manager</b>	Section 1 (challenges) + institutional barriers vignette(s) + Section 6 (adaptation)	Adult/Professional/Organisational Guide + guide companion + PLC resources (pattern labs)	AELD as a culture/conditions approach: what to enable, what to protect, and how to support democratic practices in institutions
<b>Policy actor / curriculum designer / decision-maker</b>	Sections 1–2 (why it matters) + Section 6 (contextual responsiveness)	Any phase Guide (depending on the level you influence) + guide companion for additional resources	Enabling-conditions framing, implementation pathways by phase, and language to support sustainable adoption (not “one-size-fits-all”)
<b>Researcher / artist</b>	Sections 2–4 (why/what/core ideas)	Guide companion for additional resources + Guides for examples and field connections	Shared conceptual language + practice-connected entry points for inquiry, documentation, and arts-based research

Start small, adapt locally, and use reflection to iterate.

## **Connecting with the Guides for practice**

To support you in whatever way you want to follow up on the Framework, there is a set of Guides to Practice. This Framework explores the why and what of AELD. The four Guides focus on the how of practising AELD.

There is a Guide for each of the four phases of education:

- early years and primary
- secondary
- higher education
- adult, professional and organisational learning

Each Guide:

- provides examples, activities, and reflective tools drawn from across Europe.
- offers adaptable strategies for different educational levels and contexts.
- helps educators and organisations design, implement and reflect on their own AELD-inspired practices.

Additional resources are available to support the Framework and the Guides. These include information about the research on which these are based, position papers on key concepts, case studies and videos. All of this is on the AECED website ([www.aeced.org](http://www.aeced.org)).



Together, the Framework, Guides and additional resources form a living ecology of resources:

- The Framework grounds you in values, principles, conceptual language and a summary of why AELD is important and what it is.
- The Guides translate those ideas into living practice – inviting reflection, creativity and experimentation.
- The practice companion and Resource Packs have additional resources and activities to support you to explore further if you wish – for example, about the research on which the Framework and Guides are grounded

### **Explore, experiment, connect**

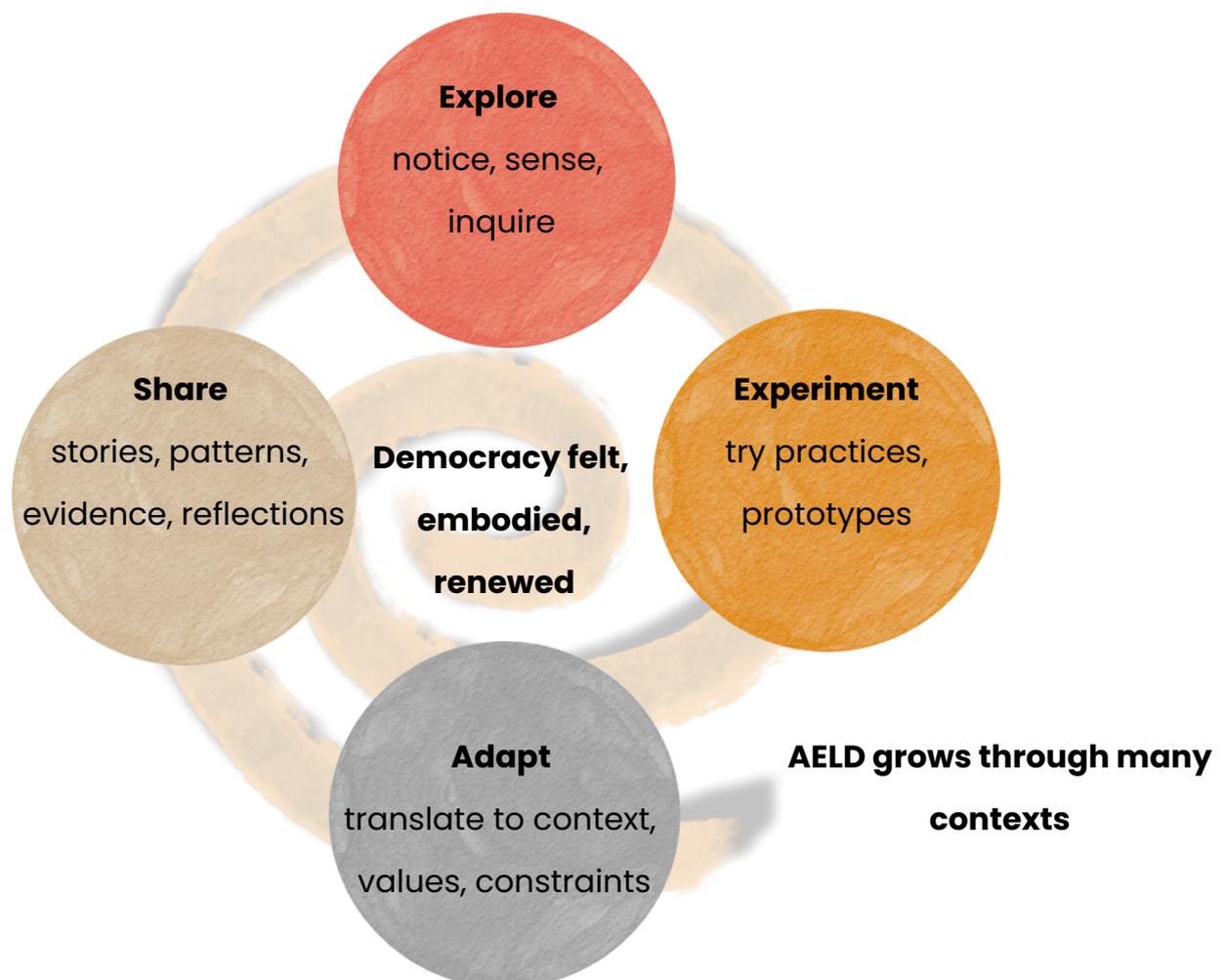
To continue your journey with AELD:

- Explore the AECED website, where you can access the Framework, Guides and additional resources developed across six countries.
- Experiment and reflect – start small or build on existing practice, observe what changes emerge and how others respond, and let practice and policy evolve democratically.
- Connect with others within and outside of your own organisation, to share your AELD experiences and adaptations and engage in discussion.

## A living process

AELD is not a closed model, but a living and growing field of democratic learning. Its strength lies in how it is reimagined by those who use it. All who experiment with it contribute to a shared and evolving practice – one that learns how democracy can be felt, embodied, and renewed through learning – wherever they are in the world.

By exploring, adapting, and sharing AELD in your context and being part of the wider conversation, you help to keep democracy alive - as something we learn, sense, and create together.



# APPENDICES

## Glossary



### **Acceptive Gaze**

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 teachers 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.

### **Aesthetic**

The array of senses that evoke not only feelings and emotions, but also knowing, pre-reflective meaning-making processes and immediate, emotionally-charged evaluations.

## **Aesthetic and embodied learning**

Aesthetic and embodied learning is holistic learning, where the interconnections between feelings, senses, movements and thinking are taken into account. This involves enabling our aesthetic-embodied dimension to grow and flourish without a dominating emphasis being given to the development of linear and logical thinking, which tends to emphasise cognitive knowledge.

## **Aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD)**

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 has a crucial role to play in ensuring education for democracy is much more than a process of learning dominated by abstractions, cognitive learning and linear, rationalistic thinking.

## **Aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods**

These are activities that involve movement, bodily awareness and creative expression, as well as sharing, reflecting on and learning from feelings and aesthetic and bodily senses. They can include: collage, drawing, painting and photography; movement, dance, and drama; storytelling, poetry and reflective writing; sound, rhythm and performance; and mindful or sensory exercises. Aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods can enable people to understand and experience democracy in new ways that are meaningful to them. These activities are sometimes referred to as arts-based and embodied (ABE) methods of learning.

### **Aesthetic and embodied reflexivity**

Critical, probing reflection that raises and addresses challenging questions about the patterns, values, beliefs and assumptions in our aesthetic experiences and where attention is intentionally directed towards bodily responses as part of the learning process.

### **Arts-based and embodied methods**

See Aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods.

### **Attentiveness**

A deep, sustained quality of attention – noticing the subtle, the overlooked, the embodied. Attentiveness is both cognitive and ethical: it makes space for care, curiosity and genuine encounter with others.

### **Bodily response**

Bodies respond to the environment, including other learners, with their movements, senses, emotions and thoughts both consciously and unconsciously. These responses are reciprocal, happening simultaneously in all educational relations.

## **Democracy-as-becoming**

An understanding of democracy as a living, unfinished process, continually created through our interactions, choices and relationships. It is not a fixed system, nor just 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 practice and renew every day – in how we speak, listen, collaborate and care.

## **Democratic principles**

These describe what it means to practise democracy-as-becoming and offer guides for action in the creation of democracy as a process of becoming. See the glossary entry for each of the values: Power-sharing; Transforming dialogue; Holistic learning; and Relational well-being.

### **Democratic sensibility**

In short, this is a feel for democracy. Democratic sensibility is the quality of being attentive to, appreciating, nurturing and responding to senses, awareness, attributes and feelings vital for the flourishing of democratic practice and relations and for connecting with others in more democratic ways.

### **Democratic values**

These are the core democratic values at the heart of AELD. See the glossary entry for each of the values: Freedom; Equality and equity; and Responsiveness.

### **Education for democracy**

This is about supporting and preparing individuals to actively participate in democratic societies and settings and to relate to others democratically. Education for democracy includes learning about knowledge of democracy (its institutions and practices, human rights, inequalities, social justice and other matters) and democratic skills (such as people's capabilities to initiate, engage with or respond to democratic activity). However, it is not only about knowledge and skills. It is also about supporting and preparing individuals to participate and engage with others democratically by nurturing democratic sensibility.

## **Equality and equity**

Equality and equity are core democratic values at the heart of AELD and are based on a recognition that everyone is valued and that everyone's voice, body and experience matter. Equality requires that each receives the same as everyone else: for example, that educators and participants in education for democracy are all provided with the same rights and responsibilities regardless of their age, gender, class, racial or ethnic identity and socio-economic background. Equity requires that each receives what they need to enable them to enjoy equal opportunity: for example, this may mean varying the resources and support some receive in order to counter the unequal effects of different socio-cultural backgrounds, gender, nationalities, age and physical capabilities which position participants in education for democracy differently in regard to principles such as power-sharing in educational interactions.

## **Embodiment**

A holistic perspective on human beings, where the emphasis is on understanding the interconnections between body-mind, body-environment, body-other bodies and institutions-bodies.

## **Freedom**

The ability to think, act and express oneself openly and responsibly. Freedom is one of the core democratic values at the heart of AELD. A felt sense of the value of freedom can guide the content and form of AELD, helping to shape how learning environments are created and shared.

## **Holistic learning**

Holistic learning recognises that learning does not take place only through formal instruction or reading, but through many mediums – such as artistic production, movement, discussion, watching films, or shared reflection on lived experiences. In many cases, such experiences can be more meaningful or transformative than the formal content itself, precisely because they engage feelings, relationships and embodied understanding.

## **Imagination**

The human capacity to envision what is not yet, to see possibilities and to empathise with other perspectives. Imagination allows people to reimagine education and democracy, making transformation conceivable and desirable.

## **Pattern Language of Commoning (PLC)**

A collection of recurring patterns that describe how people organise collectively to care for and sustain shared resources through democratic, relational practices. Presented as a card deck, the PLC supports reflection, dialogue, and collective learning by helping groups explore and connect practices of commoning in open-ended, non-prescriptive ways. This topic is covered in more detail in the adult education, professional and organisational learning guide and practice companion.

## **Power sharing**

Power sharing concerns active involvement in shaping the institutions, culture and relationships that make up our social and organisational environment. This includes having a say in decisions that affect us, holding power-holders to account and contributing to new possibilities that emerge from dialogue and collaborative interaction. It also includes individual discretion to take initiatives, express identity and act freely, exercising pro-active agency (initiation and enactment of change with confidence and conviction to carry it through), within the parameters of agreed values and responsibilities.

## **Relational well-being**

Relational well-being is the product of the interplay between individuality and connectedness. It concerns the creation of social cohesion (within a broader sense of connectedness) and positive feelings of involvement through participation. It fosters feelings of empowerment and high self-esteem as a member of a democratic community which values individuality – that is, the capacity to think for oneself, develop one's holistic capabilities and exercise pro-active agency. Such community is characterised by fertile conditions and relationships that support and are enriched by each person being open to their own possibilities. It also creates a context that engenders a sense of belonging and helps to nurture a connectedness to other people, the natural world and all that nurtures the human spirit.

## **Responsiveness**

Responsiveness means attentiveness to others' needs, voices, experiences and to one's bodily resonances (emotions, sensations and thoughts) that are emerging while relating with others. It is one of the core democratic values at the heart of AELD. A felt sense of the value of responsiveness can guide and shape the content and form of AELD, helping to shape how learning environments are created and shared.

## **Responsive pedagogy**

Responsive pedagogy seeks to give practical effect to the active role of both educators and learners, emphasising 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 wider context – including history, place, policy, and social positioning such as gender, class, and race.

## **Transforming dialogue**

Transforming dialogue involves exchanging and exploring views and engaging in open debate by practising mutual respect for participants and expression of diverse and different views in the dialogue, listening to all viewpoints expressed and enabling the sharing of constructive critique. The purpose, to which the dialogue aspires, is to reach beyond narrow personal or sectional perspectives and interests, enhance mutual understanding, and, with the greater good of all in mind, seek out areas of agreement, recognise and increase understanding of disagreements that endure and create new possibilities for shared action.

## Cases settings and the participants/learners who engaged with AECED

Case	Partner	Participants	Education phase	Identifier
1	Croatia	Primary school teachers kindergarten teachers	Early years and Primary Education	CR:1
2	Croatia	Primary school teachers	Primary Education	CR:2
3	Croatia	Teaching staff and postdoctoral students	Higher Education	CR:3
4	Croatia	Teacher education students	Higher Education	CR:4
5	Finland	Higher education teaching staff and students	Higher Education	FI:5
6	Finland	Dance and movement therapists Higher education teaching staff	Adult/Professional/ Organisational Learning	FI:6

## Cases settings and the participants/learners who engaged with AECED

Case	Partner	Participants	Education phase	Identifier
7	Germany	Bachelor's and Master's students	Higher Education	DE:7
8	Germany	Professionals working in schools, social work, ministry of education, and institutions of social inclusion, participating in a higher education further education MA Program	Adult/Professional/ Organisational Learning	DE:8
9	Germany	German Commoning Network (professionals, counsellors, educators, and activists in the Commoning field)	Adult/Professional/ Organisational Learning	DE:9
10	Germany	Experts, multipliers, and facilitators in arts education & higher education students in teacher training	Higher Education & Adult/Professional/ Organisational Learning	DE:10

## Cases settings and the participants/learners who engaged with AECED

Case	Partner	Participants	Education phase	Identifier
11	Latvia	Secondary school teachers, principals and students	Secondary Education	LV:11
12	Latvia	Secondary school teachers, principals and students	Secondary Education and Adult/Professional/Organisational Learning	LV:12
13	Latvia	Secondary school teachers, principals and students	Secondary Education and Intergenerational Learning	LV:13
14	Portugal	Preschool and Primary School Teachers/educators	Early Years & Primary Education	PT:14
15	Portugal	Preschool and Primary School Teachers/educators	Early Years & Primary Education	PT:15

## Cases settings and the participants/learners who engaged with AECED

Case	Partner	Participants	Education phase	Identifier
16	Portugal	Vocational learning teachers	Adult/Professional/ Organisational Learning	PT:16
17	Portugal	Vocational learning teachers	Adult/Professional/ Organisational Learning	PT:17
18	UK	Doctoral supervisors	Professional Learning in Higher Education	UK:18
19	UK	Teachers	Secondary Education	UK:19

## Recommended reading



To explore AELD in more depth, the best starting point is the AECED Project website at [www.aeced.org](http://www.aeced.org). There you can find:

- The Pedagogical Framework (this document)
- The AECED Guides for Practice, which offer examples, activities, and reflection tools
- The Resource Pack
- The Research Reports (Deliverables D4.4 and D4.5), which describe how AELD was developed and trialled, and how findings were synthesised across six European countries:
  - AECED Project. (2024). National and intra-phase synthesis reports (Deliverable D4.4). AECED Project. (URL forthcoming)
  - AECED Project. (2025). Transnational conclusions and evidence based implications (Deliverable D4.5). AECED Project. (URL forthcoming)
- Position Papers (available at <https://aeced.org/resources/>):
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