

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY: AESTHETIC AND EMBODIED LEARNING IN THE AECED PROJECT

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Abstract

Democracy is a dynamic and evolving process that requires continuous engagement, reflection, and transformation. Traditional educational approaches often emphasize cognitive competencies at the expense of emotional, sensory, and embodied dimensions of learning. The AECED Project addresses this gap by developing pedagogical frameworks that integrate Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD) to enhance democratic engagement. This study presents preliminary findings from an 8-week online course designed for early childhood and primary educators, as well as adult and professional learners in Portugal. Using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, the course encouraged educators to experiment with AELD methodologies, fostering power-sharing, transformative dialogue, holistic learning, and relational well-being in their classrooms. Data from surveys, reflections, forum discussions, and intervention projects were analysed through a mixed-methods approach, revealing shifts toward more participatory and democratic teaching practices. The study highlights the potential of AELD in fostering inclusive and engaged learning environments and underscores the role of digital learning ecologies in supporting democratic pedagogies.

Keywords: Aesthetic and Embodied Learning, Democracy, Transformative Learning, Participatory Action Research, Digital Learning.

1 INTRODUCTION

Democracy is not a fixed state but an evolving process that requires continuous engagement, reflection, and transformation [1]. Education plays a critical role in fostering democratic values, yet traditional pedagogies often emphasize cognitive competencies at the expense of emotional, sensory, and embodied dimensions [2] [3]. The AECED Project aims to address this gap by developing pedagogical frameworks and materials that integrate aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD) to nurture democratic engagement.

In Portugal, a key initiative within the project was the development of an 8-week online course tailored for early childhood and primary educators, and adult and professional learning. This course was designed as a participatory space where educators could critically engage with democratic teaching practices while co-researching their implementation through Participatory Action Research (PAR). The course provided both theoretical grounding and practical applications of AELD, empowering educators to integrate these approaches into their classrooms.

This paper presents preliminary findings from four case studies of educators who participated in the course. We analyse their experiences, focusing on how AELD facilitated engagement with democracy-as-becoming, emphasizing power-sharing, transformative dialogue, holistic learning, and relational well-being.

1.1 Case Description

The Portuguese research team developed and implemented an online course between April and June 2024, hosted on the Universidade Aberta's Moodle platform. The course was structured into six themes aligned with Participatory Action Research (PAR): introduction, familiarization, collaborative reflection, planning, action, and final reflection.

1.1.1 Participants

A total of 101 educators expressed interest in the course, with 40 (20 for each educational level) selected based on criteria such as academic background, teaching level, and geographical representation. By the end of the course, 23 educators (aged 43 to 65) successfully completed all activities. These educators assumed the role of co-researchers, integrating AELD methodologies into their teaching while documenting and reflecting on their experiences.

1.1.2 Course Design and Implementation

The course provided 50 hours of training, including 15 hours of online sessions and 35 hours of independent study. It was accredited by the Scientific-Pedagogical Council for Continuing Education, granting 2 ECTS credits. Trainers played a critical role in facilitating learning, tracking progress, fostering interaction, and ensuring quality standards.

It was structured around a progressive sequence of key activities designed to introduce and deepen participants' understanding of Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD) and Participatory Action Research (PAR). It began with an Introduction, providing an overview of these core concepts and establishing a theoretical foundation for the learning journey. In the Familiarization phase, participants engaged with pedagogical guides and frameworks, allowing them to critically examine existing methodologies and approaches.

As the course advanced, Collaborative Reflection took place through discussion forums, where educators explored the practical applications of AELD in diverse educational contexts. This stage fostered peer learning and knowledge exchange, preparing participants for the Planning phase, in which they designed intervention projects tailored to their specific teaching environments. The Action stage involved the direct implementation and documentation of AELD activities, enabling participants to test and refine their approaches in real-world settings. Finally, in the Final Reflection, educators shared their findings, analysed outcomes, and revised methodologies based on collective ideas, reinforcing the iterative and participatory nature of the learning process.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study adopted Participatory Action Research (PAR) as its foundational methodological approach, structured around the cyclical phases of planning, action, observation, and reflection [4]. It combined qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods to ensure both depth and breadth in the analysis of the participants' experiences with Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD).

2.1 Research Design and Activities

The Portuguese case studies were developed through an 8-week online course conducted between April and June 2024. Targeted at early childhood and primary educators, the course aimed to equip participants with the theoretical foundations and practical skills necessary to engage as co-researchers within the project. The course was structured into six thematic modules that aligned with the phases of PAR: introduction, familiarisation, collaborative reflection, planning, action, and final reflection.

The pedagogical design emphasised a participatory, iterative, and reflective learning journey. Participants were introduced to the Prototype Framework and Guide through online collaborative discussions, readings, and individual reflections. This initial stage enabled them to explore core concepts and strategies associated with AELD, while identifying contextual barriers and opportunities for implementation in their own teaching environments.

Central to the course were co-creation activities that facilitated the integration of Aesthetic-Based Education (ABE) methods. Participants designed lesson plans and classroom interventions based on embodied, sensory, and participatory experiences. These practices were closely linked to democratic values such as inclusivity, agency, and collaboration. Educators reflected on their pedagogical choices and how these could foster democratic engagement through embodied and aesthetic modes of learning.

2.2 Data Collection

The following data sources were used including structured assignments, such as AELD proposals and personal reflections:

- 1 Online surveys (n=23) – Collected pre- and post-course ideas
- 2 Discussion forums (50+ topics) – Captured peer interactions and reflections
- 3 Individual reflections (n=23) – Provided personal ideas, suggestions and reflections into pedagogical shifts
- 4 Intervention project proposals (n=23) – Documented AELD implementation plans
- 5 Photographic records (+100 images) – Visual documentation of classroom activities

6 Video recordings (n=6) – Captured real-time engagement with AEL

This multi-modal data collection strategy enabled a detailed understanding of the educators' transformative experiences and the effectiveness of the AELD framework.

2.3 Data Integration and Analysis

A triangulation approach was employed to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. Information data from surveys, interviews, forum discussions, assignment submissions, and multimedia documentation were cross analysed to identify converging patterns and discrepancies. This triangulated analysis helped corroborate findings across different data types and perspectives.

The study adopted a mixed-methods analytical framework. Quantitative data, derived primarily from survey results, provided statistical ideas into participation trends and shifts in pedagogical orientation. Qualitative data from open-ended responses, interviews, and reflections allowed for deeper contextual interpretations. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes, while visual and discourse analysis techniques supported the interpretation of multimodal data.

Emerging themes included the integration of embodied pedagogies, the co-creation of democratic practices, and the adaptation of theoretical frameworks to local classroom realities. Participants' feedback was continuously reviewed through an iterative process to refine the Prototype Framework and Guide. Revisions focused on improving accessibility, visual clarity, and implementation strategies, particularly by addressing institutional and structural barriers.

2.4 Final Synthesis and Implications

The final phase of analysis involved synthesizing the data to evaluate the effectiveness of the Prototype Framework and Guide in promoting democratic education through AELD. Post-course questionnaires assessed the relevance, clarity, and transformative impact of the course content. This feedback informed final recommendations for enhancing the scalability and applicability of the framework in diverse educational contexts. Emphasis was placed on supporting individual, collective, and epistemic transformation among educators and learners alike.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Engagement with the Framework and Initial Implementation

The case studies conducted in Portugal revealed significant findings on the integration and impact of the Prototype Framework and Guide in promoting Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD). Participants, particularly those already familiar with democratic pedagogical practices, found the initial engagement with the Framework intellectually stimulating. While the theoretical content was well understood, several educators noted the need for more practical illustrations and clearer visual elements to support its application in real-world contexts. This feedback suggests a high level of engagement and critical interaction with the proposed concepts.

3.2 Co-Creation of AELD through Aesthetic-Based Education

The co-creation of AELD through Aesthetic-Based Education (ABE) methods proved to be a central mechanism in fostering democratic learning. Participants emphasized the value of embodied participation, reporting that activities involving movement, expression, and sensory engagement deepened their connection to the content and promoted holistic learning. These findings align with previous research on the importance of somaesthetic awareness in educational contexts [2] [3] and support the argument that learning is not merely cognitive but fundamentally embodied.

Interactive learning environments, particularly online forums and collaborative projects encouraged shared reflection and collective meaning-making. These dialogical processes reflect Biesta's conceptualization of democracy-as-becoming [1] and were instrumental in helping participants reposition themselves as active agents in educational transformation. The inclusion of arts-based and multimodal practices further reinforced this shift, highlighting the importance of multiple ways of knowing and engaging with democratic values.

3.3 Transformative Learning and Democratic Engagement

Transformative learning experiences emerged across individual and collective dimensions. Educators reported emotional and embodied connections to concepts such as inclusion, power-sharing, and social justice. For instance, collaborative performances and dance workshops provided opportunities to explore democratic principles not only intellectually but through felt, embodied experience—underscoring Mezirow’s and Kegan’s notions of transformative learning through affective and critical engagement [5][6][7].

Participants also reported shifts in pedagogical perspective—from passive delivery to active co-construction of knowledge. This movement echoes Freirean praxis, in which action and reflection combine to produce meaningful educational change. In this sense, the Framework helped participants develop critical awareness of their roles as educators and fostered more inclusive and participatory classroom dynamics.

The co-creative dimension of the project also highlighted the relational nature of democracy. As educators worked collaboratively to design and implement aesthetic and embodied interventions, they experienced democracy as shared authorship and mutual respect. These experiences cultivated empathy, ethical sensibilities, and an openness to difference—qualities essential to democratic education [1][3].

3.4 Role of the Researchers in the Learning Process

The researchers played a facilitative role in this process, structuring the learning environment and guiding participant engagement without overdetermining outcomes. Their involvement was characterized by dialogic support, conceptual scaffolding, and a commitment to co-learning, which helped ensure that the Framework remained adaptable and responsive to local contexts. This reflects Kemmis and McTaggart’s vision of Participatory Action Research as a communicative and democratic endeavour [4].

3.5 Recommendations for Refinement

From the trial experience, several implications for refinement emerged. While the conceptual clarity of the Prototype Framework was widely acknowledged, participants indicated a need for greater pedagogical scaffolding and practical tools. Suggestions included the development of step-by-step guides, digital toolkits, and adaptable lesson templates. Moreover, the inclusion of visual and multimodal resources was proposed to enhance accessibility and engagement, especially for educators unfamiliar with ABE approaches.

3.6 Challenges and Limitations

Despite the generally positive reception, limitations were observed. Participant attrition, due to competing professional obligations, highlighted the challenges of sustaining engagement in asynchronous online formats. Additionally, technical limitations—particularly concerning the collection of multimedia data—constrained the depth of embodied documentation, affecting the richness of qualitative perception. Furthermore, while the course was intended to introduce innovative concepts, many participants described it as reinforcing existing understandings of democratic education, suggesting the value of the course lay in consolidating rather than transforming perspectives.

3.7 Influence of Cultural and Institutional Context

Contextual factors also played a significant role in shaping the outcomes. Portugal’s democratic culture, emphasis on teacher autonomy, and strong professional development infrastructure created favourable conditions for the implementation of AELD. Nevertheless, systemic constraints, such as rigid curricula and standardized assessment pressures, posed barriers to more widespread adoption of embodied and aesthetic approaches. These findings affirm the importance of aligning innovative pedagogies with institutional realities while maintaining the transformative potential of democratic education.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The preliminary findings of this study reinforce the transformative potential of Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD) in cultivating meaningful democratic engagement among educators

and students. By integrating participatory, aesthetic, and embodied methodologies, the course created fertile ground for educators to critically examine and redesign their pedagogical approaches, fostering a shift from teacher-centred models to more student-driven, relational, and inclusive practices.

The emphasis on power-sharing, transformative dialogue, and relational well-being reconfigured traditional classroom hierarchies and promoted new forms of interaction grounded in mutual respect, co-agency, and shared responsibility. These dynamics resonated with core democratic principles such as autonomy, equity, and pluralism, not merely as abstract values but as embodied practices sustained in everyday educational encounters.

Participants reported a heightened awareness of how aesthetic and embodied engagement could deepen ethical sensibilities, enhance empathic connections, and support collective meaning-making. The learning process foregrounded emotional, imaginative, and sensory modes of knowing, helping educators reconnect with the body as a source of perception and expression—thus challenging dualistic pedagogies that isolate cognition from affect and action. In this sense, the Framework supported a reconfiguration of professional identity, encouraging educators to assume roles as facilitators of dialogue and co-creators of democratic spaces.

The study also highlights the enabling role of the online environment in fostering democratic pedagogies. The flexibility and accessibility of digital platforms facilitated the inclusion of diverse voices and temporalities, creating opportunities for asynchronous reflection and peer collaboration. Grounded in a connectivist learning model, the course design supported distributed inquiry, digital co-creation, and shared authorship, demonstrating that online education—when intentionally designed—can function as a powerful catalyst for democratic engagement [8] [9].

The researchers' facilitative role was key in balancing structure and openness. Rather than prescribing fixed paths, they curated spaces of exploration, offered conceptual scaffolds, and positioned themselves as co-learners, reinforcing the project's democratic ethos. This non-hierarchical stance contributed to an environment of trust and experimentation, allowing participants to adapt the Prototype Framework in ways that were contextually relevant and pedagogically meaningful.

At the same time, the study revealed structural and cultural tensions. While the Portuguese context—marked by a strong valuing of teacher autonomy and relational learning—supported the adoption of AELD, participants encountered institutional constraints such as standardized assessment pressures, rigid curricula, and a lack of time and resources for experimentation. These factors point to the broader systemic challenges of embedding embodied and democratic pedagogies within educational systems that often prioritize efficiency and control over creativity and participation.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that aesthetic and embodied approaches are not peripheral to democratic education—they are foundational. By engaging the whole person—mind, body, and emotion—they foster more holistic, ethically grounded, and socially responsive learning experiences. The Prototype Framework and Guide, as dynamic tools shaped through practice and reflection, offer promising pathways for reimagining education as a space of democratic possibility. For this potential to be fully realized, however, continued investment in teacher training, institutional support, and the reconfiguration of learning ecologies will be necessary.

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