

EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT - TEACHER TRAINING PRACTICES FOR AESTHETIC AND EMBODIED LEARNING

C. Neves, J. Gazzinelli, A.P. Almeida, M. Abelha, P. Abrantes

Universidade Aberta de Lisboa (PORTUGAL)

Abstract

This paper presents the results of an online continuous training course developed within the scope of the European project AECED (Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy-as-becoming), focused on teachers and educators of pre-school, early years and vocational education in Portugal. Based on the principles of Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD) and anchored in the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, the training promoted spaces for co-research, critical reflection and pedagogical co-creation in a digital environment. The training proposal articulated somatic and aesthetic approaches with the foundations of democratic pedagogy, aiming to reconfigure teaching practices and expand the possibilities of an education centered on sensitivity, expression and dialogue.

The research was based on the qualitative analysis of multiple data sources — discussion forums, reflective diaries, interviews and pedagogical projects with audiovisual and narrative documentation in all phases of the course, lasting eight weeks. The analysis revealed significant changes in the participants' conceptions of democracy in education, revealing a shift from a normative and curricular vision to a relational, sensitive perspective situated in everyday practices. Teachers began to recognize the body and sensoriality as legitimate dimensions of mediation of knowledge and democratic coexistence, assuming their role as facilitators of participatory and inclusive contexts.

Despite the technical and institutional challenges associated with eLearning — such as limitations on sharing multimedia materials, ethical restrictions on the use of images, and difficulties in emotional connection in asynchronous environments — participants mobilized creative strategies that allowed them to overcome these obstacles. The activities developed included visual narratives, movement workshops, the creation of thematic performances, and sensitive listening dynamics, fostering critical thinking, empathy, inclusion, and mutual respect. These experiences revealed that, even in digital environments, it is possible to create aesthetic and embodied learning spaces capable of promoting democratic values and renewing pedagogical engagement.

Another central aspect that emerged was the appreciation of collaborative dynamics, which were expressed in forums and shared activities as ways of building online learning communities. Through mutual support, sharing of vulnerabilities and active listening, participants created networks of co-reflection and pedagogical experimentation. The application of the Community of Inquiry model allowed us to analyze how cognitive, social and pedagogical presence was constructed throughout the course, favoring an ethical, critical and relational learning experience.

The results suggest that the articulation between AELD and PAR in digital environments represents a promising path for the professional development of teachers and for the reinvention of more sensitive, participatory and democratic educational practices. The work also continued with recommendations to expand the integration of aesthetic and embodied approaches in teacher training, including: greater curricular flexibility, institutional support for pedagogical experimentation, appreciation of sensitive and bodily expression as a formative dimension, and public policies that encourage education centered on listening, inclusion and democratic transformation.

Keywords: Continuous Training, e-learning, Democratic Education, Aesthetic and Embodied Learning, Participatory Action Research, Pedagogical Innovation.

1 INTRODUCTION

The international AECED (Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy-as-becoming) project, funded by Horizon Europe, sought to develop and test pedagogical strategies that promote education for democracy through aesthetic and embodied experiences. The project's central idea was to address what it identified as a gap in democracy education, arguing that purely cognitive and curricular approaches are insufficient. The project proposed developing a pedagogical framework and practical

guides to promote democratic practices based on aesthetic and embodied learning. Experiences were conducted in six European countries: Finland, Germany, the United Kingdom, Croatia, Latvia, and Portugal. In Portugal, the project involved four case studies with pre-school, basic, and vocational educators and teachers who participated in an eight-week online training course.

This study analyzes the impact of that training on the promotion of democratic, aesthetic, and embodied pedagogical practices. It explores how the course transformed participants' views, the dynamics they developed, and the relationships they established with students. The study's relevance lies in its contribution to the debate on pedagogical innovation, professional development, and democracy education in digital environments by connecting the principles of aesthetic and embodied learning with the potential of eLearning.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The AECED project is based on the philosophical ideas of somaesthetics by Shusterman (2008), which unites the body, aesthetics, and practice to rethink human experience and education. The project was also inspired by the work of Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009), who argued that democratic learning can only be achieved through lived, relational experiences and feelings. Biesta's (2011) concept of "democracy as becoming" also informed the project, emphasizing democracy as a continuous, unpredictable, and ethical process. These ideas highlight education as a space for collective discussion, sharing, and learning.

The project's methodological framework is based on Participatory Action Research (PAR), which positions educators as co-researchers in their own contexts. This approach promotes active involvement and critical reflection, making participants agents of their own professional development. The Portuguese studies specifically explored approaches to continuing teacher education in digital environments.

The theoretical framework for digital learning was informed by connectivism (Siemens, 2005), which understands learning as the ability to establish connections within a constantly changing digital ecosystem. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000) was also crucial for analyzing how meaningful knowledge is constructed in online environments, emphasizing the balance between cognitive, social, and pedagogical presence.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study used a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, which involved participants not just as subjects but as active co-investigators in the creation, implementation, and critical reflection on pedagogical practices for democracy. The methodology also integrated principles of transformative learning, collaborative digital learning, the Community of Inquiry model, and connectivism.

2.1 Description of the online course

The study was conducted through an eight-week online continuing education course from April to June 2024, hosted on the Universidade Aberta's Moodle platform. The course, which had a total of 50 hours, was structured around six phases aligned with the PAR cycle: Introduction, Familiarization, Collaborative Reflection, Planning, Action, and Analysis and Synthesis. It followed a visual and narrative approach (VEN-Approach), using stories, images, and artistic expression to promote critical thinking and democratic sensitivity.

2.2 Participant Profile

The course included 34 teachers and educators from various levels of education and regions in Portugal. Of these, 12 were from pre-school and elementary education, and 11 were from vocational education. Participants' ages ranged from 43 to 65, and they represented a diverse group in terms of teaching experience, institutional context (public, private, associations), and geographical location.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected continuously throughout the course from multiple sources, including online discussion forums (over 50 topics generated), weekly reflective diaries, email interviews with pre-school and elementary teachers, and pedagogical proposals with associated documentation (texts, photos, videos). The data analysis was qualitative and used a mixed-methods approach. Techniques included

content analysis to identify thematic categories, thematic analysis to find patterns related to teacher identity, co-creation, and aesthetic/embodied experiences, and elements of grounded theory for inductive interpretation. Triangulation of data from all sources was used to ensure validity.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Individual transformations in teaching practice

The data revealed significant changes in participants' views and practices. Initially, democracy was seen as a curricular or formal exercise, but after the course, it was understood as a more relational and sensitive approach that could be developed in small, daily activities. The use of aesthetic and embodied activities (e.g., visual narratives, performances) led participants to value the body and artistic expression as important ways to experience democratic values such as inclusion, empathy, and dialogue.

Many participants also reported a shift in their role from a simple transmitter of content to a facilitator and mediator who is sensitive to promoting participatory and inclusive learning contexts. They also began to recognize their own body as a legitimate pedagogical tool for mediating conflicts and listening to student emotions. The activities prompted participants to rethink their professional planning, approaching topics like citizenship and social justice in a more open and playful way, allowing for emotion, improvisation, and free expression.

3.2 Aesthetic and embodied learning experiences in a virtual context

The course successfully explored various forms of aesthetic and embodied learning, overcoming the limitations of the digital format. Pedagogical experiences shared by participants included visual narratives (photography, digital collage), body listening exercises, movement workshops, and storytelling with objects. These activities fostered emotional engagement, critical thinking, and empathy, and were used to address topics like inclusion, interculturality, and human rights. Participants noted that these sensory, embodied, and aesthetic activities disrupted conventional routines and awakened new forms of attention and participation in students.

Participants also found creative ways to overcome technological limitations and privacy concerns related to sharing videos. They documented their experiences through narrative descriptions, drawings, and visual metaphors, suggesting that the digital environment has the potential to foster a responsive, creative, and democratic pedagogy.

3.3 Challenges and barriers to implementation in eLearning

Participants noted several obstacles, both technological and institutional, to implementing aesthetic and embodied learning practices in digital environments. Technological limitations included the difficulty of sharing large multimedia files on the Moodle platform. Ethical restrictions on using images of children also limited the expressive potential of the documented activities.

While participants valued the flexibility of the online format, some felt that deeper connections and proximity were inhibited, which affected the social and emotional presence in the learning process. Pedagogically, some participants felt uncomfortable with unconventional methods that used the body and artistic expression, as these practices are often not well-accepted by colleagues, families, or educational leaders. The rigidity of curricular programs and the emphasis on measurable outcomes were also cited as bureaucratic obstacles that demobilized the initial enthusiasm for these experimental activities. Many participants highlighted the need for institutional policies that encourage pedagogical experimentation.

3.4 Collaborative learning and the construction of virtual communities

One of the most valued aspects of the course was the opportunity for participants to learn through peer dialogue and reflection on concrete practices. The pedagogical strategies, such as discussion forums and collaborative activities, were seen as essential for developing virtual learning communities. In the forums, participants showed a progressive involvement that went beyond simply completing tasks, providing mutual support and sharing vulnerabilities.

This collaborative dimension strengthened the social presence in the virtual environment, as described by Garrison et al. (2000), and created a community of co-investigators where each participant felt

integral to the co-construction of knowledge. The active participation and co-construction in the digital environment demonstrated that virtual learning communities can promote pedagogical innovation and democratic values, even in an asynchronous format.

3.5 Discussion

The findings suggest that online training based on AELD had a significant impact on participants' views and practices, contributing to a re-evaluation of the teacher's role in teaching democracy. The evidence confirms the potential of AELD-based learning to inspire education for citizenship and democratic processes in educational contexts. This training experience showed that body and artistic expression can promote democratic feelings and experiences, even in a digital environment. This aligns with Biesta's (2011) concept of "democracy as becoming," which views democracy as a constant process rather than a fixed set of curricular goals.

Methodologically, the use of Participatory Action Research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) empowered participants to become active learners and producers of contextualized pedagogical knowledge. The Community of Inquiry model also proved to be a key reference for designing meaningful digital learning environments, as it successfully fostered social, cognitive, and pedagogical presence throughout the course.

However, the study also highlighted tensions and obstacles, including technical constraints, curricular pressures, and institutional resistance. These barriers underscore the need for more profound, systemic changes beyond professional training to create conditions for a truly democratic experience in education.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The four case studies in Portugal demonstrate that integrating aesthetic and embodied learning with a Participatory Action Research approach in a digital environment has a significant impact on both individual and collective learning. Participants showed transformations in their understanding of democracy, their relationships with students, and the pedagogical role of the body, emotions, and feelings. Despite limitations, the training showed that it is possible to develop collaborative, participatory, and democratic virtual learning communities.

However, these training offerings alone are not enough to sustain a transformation of practices. Systemic changes and cultural transformations are necessary to recognize democratic values and promote creativity and experience as essential dimensions of continuing teacher education.

Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are presented:

- Review curricula and evaluation systems to allow for greater flexibility in integrating democratic, artistic, and embodied practices.
- Develop and disseminate AELD resources, such as pedagogical frameworks and practical guides, with contextualized examples of their application.
- Invest in initial and continuing teacher training in digital environments to equip educators with somatic and aesthetic skills for innovative pedagogical experiences.
- Ensure adequate technical access and conditions for all educators, especially in peripheral areas or contexts with lower digital literacy.
- Promote and value pedagogical innovation institutionally and politically, recognizing training pathways that link democracy, education, and transformation.

In conclusion, this study reinforces the need to invest in underexplored dimensions of democracy education, which require not just changes in content but also in form, to include emotional and affective experiences based on aesthetic expressions and the body in motion. It supports the idea that aesthetics and embodiment are privileged paths to reinvent teacher training and renew democratic hope in education.

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