

Education for Democracy in Virtual Environment – Teacher Training Practices for Aesthetic and Embodied Learning

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The AECED Project and Democratic Education

- The AECED project (*Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy-as-becoming*) explores how aesthetic and embodied experiences can strengthen education for democracy.
- In Portugal, the initiative unfolded as an online training course for pre-school, primary, and vocational educators, inviting them to rethink democracy not as a fixed curriculum but as a lived, relational, and sensorial process. This presentation examines how virtual learning environments can host embodied and aesthetic encounters that nurture democratic sensibility and pedagogical transformation.



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Conceptual framework

Grounded in *Biesta's* notion of “**democracy-as-becoming**”, the study understands democracy as a continuous process of ethical and relational engagement. Drawing on *Shusterman's somaesthetics* and *Fuchs & De Jaegher's enactive intersubjectivity*, the work positions the body as a site of reflection and knowledge.

These perspectives converge with **Participatory Action Research (PAR)**, which places educators as co-researchers, and with the **Community of Inquiry (CoI)** model, which supports embodied participation in virtual spaces.



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Research aims

- This study investigates how online teacher education can become a space for aesthetic and embodied democratic learning.
Specifically, it seeks to:
 - understand how virtual environments mediate sensory and relational experiences;
 - explore transformations in teachers' perceptions of democracy, knowledge, and participation;
 - identify challenges and creative adaptations in translating embodiment to digital contexts.



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Methodology

- The research followed a **Participatory Action Research** (PAR) approach during an eight-week online course hosted by Universidade Aberta (2024).
- Thirty-four educators from different regions participated as co-researchers, engaging in cycles of reflection, planning, action, and synthesis.
- Data included discussion forums, reflective journals, and pedagogical projects with narrative and audiovisual documentation.
- Thematic and content analyses identified recurring patterns of transformation, collaboration, and resistance.

Aesthetic and Embodied Learning in a Virtual Environment

Despite the distance and mediation by screens, participants engaged in creative and sensorial practices.

They used photography, movement exercises, storytelling with objects, and visual metaphors to reintroduce the body into online learning.

These practices cultivated presence, empathy, and reflection, revealing that even virtual environments can sustain embodied forms of democratic engagement.



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Transformations in Teachers' Perspectives

- Teachers reported a profound shift from a normative view of democracy — as rules or content — to a relational and experiential understanding.
- They began to recognize their own bodies and emotions as pedagogical tools, fostering sensitivity, inclusion, and shared agency. Professional planning evolved to include affect, improvisation, and creativity as legitimate dimensions of learning.

Collaborative and Relational Dimensions

- Online discussion forums became spaces of empathy and collective inquiry.
- Through shared vulnerability, mutual support, and dialogue, participants built communities of practice that embodied democratic values.
- These dynamics reflected the *social presence* dimension of the **Community of Inquiry** model, demonstrating how digital spaces can foster authentic relational learning.

Challenge and Tensions

- Participants faced obstacles such as limited multimedia tools, ethical restrictions on image sharing, and institutional resistance to unconventional pedagogy.
- Some struggled with emotional distance inherent to asynchronous learning.
- Yet, these tensions also generated creativity — participants found alternative expressive forms through metaphors, drawings, and poetic writing.

Discussion: Democracy and Virtual Learning

- The study reveals that virtual learning can be more than a technical medium — it can become a democratic space where aesthetic and embodied encounters foster ethical and relational awareness. In digital contexts, *embodiment* translates into attentiveness, reciprocity, and imagination.
- This challenges traditional binaries between body and technology, emotion and cognition, presence and distance.

Conclusions

- Integrating AELD with PAR in digital education enables educators to reimagine teaching as an act of co-creation and ethical responsiveness. Aesthetic and embodied learning online enhances inclusion, empathy, and dialogue.
- However, sustaining these transformations requires systemic change, institutional support, and the recognition of emotion and body as central to pedagogy.

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