

# The New Education Fellowship: An international community of practice

Dr Margaret H. White

*Using the analogy of a community, this paper outlines and explores practices that developed in the New Education Fellowship in the 1920s and 1930s. Articles published in New Era are analysed to show the role of the journal in promoting discourse and debate about 'new' learning among teachers who were seeking to define their role in the New Education. Through this venture of searching for new ways to respond to the contemporary context, an international community of practice was created.*

When Beatrice Ensor, with her friends and colleagues, initiated the New Education Fellowship in 1921, they launched a community of practice that developed during the early twentieth century to make a significant contribution to the lives of children and adults across many geographical and cultural borders.

The practices that grew up in this community in the 1920s-30s, such as international conferences, the formation of autonomous individual Sections and the publication of journals, enabled members to engage in making meaning through participation. Individual sections were responsive to local conditions and had a direct link to the parent body, the International Guiding Committee.<sup>1</sup>

The analogy of a community has a particular resonance in New Education Fellowship as the concept of community was central to the principles of the organisation.<sup>2</sup> Etienne Wenger suggests: "Learning and the negotiation of meaning are ongoing within the various localities of engagement [in communities], and this process continually creates locally shared histories. This is true even when there are no serious conflicts or ruptures between localities, and a fortiori when there are."<sup>3</sup>

In this context, the New Education Fellowship is both an international community and a constellation of individual New Education Fellowship Sections.<sup>4</sup> In the post-First World War atmosphere of change and uncertainty, the loosely structured organisation of New Education Fellowship evolved in recognition of differing local circumstances and currents of thinking.

The organisers of this New Education Fellowship sought a very elastic association which could be adapted to the idiosyncrasies and methods of each individual country.<sup>5</sup>

From its inception, the New Education Fellowship embodied diversity through its membership and

publications. The journal *New Era* was subtitled *An International Review of New Education* and published in three editions: English, French and German. In recognising the diverse perspectives of members, the organisation implicitly acknowledged the necessity for the negotiation of new meanings in the wider community. Through a dynamic interplay of participation and visibilisation, the emergent structure of the New Education Fellowship facilitated engagement, encouraged imagination of possible futures and created alignments between groups and individuals.<sup>6</sup>

The editorial pages of the journal are evidence of the efforts to forge links between educators seeking to define the 'new' and to open up debate around new theoretical perspectives and their interpretation into practices. In addressing new ideas in psychology, Ensor and A. S. Neill publicly differed in their interpretations of contemporary theoretical ideas and encouraged open discussion.<sup>7</sup>

Ensor's breadth of conception of the role of New Education Fellowship is evident in her address to the 1937 International New Education Fellowship Conference in Australia:

"The Fellowship has purposefully refrained from formulating any dogma in the field of education. It has not even urged the advisability of any particular form of school room procedure, recognizing that new education is primarily a thing of spirit, the fruits of which are new relationships between child and teacher, and between child and child, new attitudes towards learning, towards authority, and one might also say between life itself."<sup>8</sup>

The role of *New Era* in visibilising the learning that embodied Ensor's conception, can be traced through the following examination of a series of articles published in the earliest editions of the journal that addressed aspects of creativity and self expression,

an area of education that underwent dramatic reconceptualisation during this period.

Between 1922-23, articles in *New Era* relevant to creativity, and artist educators included one edition (July 1922) devoted entirely to art education, another to drama in education (January 1923), and many other articles focusing on Eurythmics, Franz Cizek's art classes in Vienna, drawing, abstract art for children, and a range of issues associated with creativity and aspects of psychoanalysis. The 'new' learning in psychology is closely interconnected with perspectives on creativity and self-expression. Negotiation of new meaning underpins the articles with written accounts of learning that had been provoked through engagement at conferences. There is a palpable energy in this discourse.

In April 1922 Ensor wrote of "a crisis in educational progress..." and, while acknowledging current economic issues, advised against a return to past forms of education.<sup>9</sup> Rather, she advocated working for change in education on the grounds that "the new spirit may have better mediums for expression than the outworn and crystallised forms of the past."<sup>10</sup> In developing her editorial she engages with views expressed in current newspaper articles and calls readers to join in active protest directed to Members of Parliament, local education authorities and county councils. Seeking to change the structure of education, Ensor harnesses social energy by provoking debate and inviting readers to participate with her in this community of learning in order to bring about changes that are informed by participation in the conferences and exchanges of views through *New Era*.

The journal provided opportunities for educators and parents to participate actively in the practices of the community encouraging a sense of belonging and

identification.<sup>11</sup> Yet, engagement alone does not explain the impetus that was created in New Education Fellowship to bring about change. Inherent in the process were two other modes of belonging: imagination and alignment. The process of imagining is of particular interest in analysis of this community. Wenger recounts the story of two stonecutters who were asked what they were doing:

"One responds: 'I am cutting this stone into a perfectly square shape.' The other responds: 'I am building a cathedral.' Both answers are correct and meaningful. The difference between these answers does not imply that one is a better stonecutter than the other, as far as holding the chisel is concerned. At the level of engagement, they may well be doing exactly the same thing. But it does suggest that their experiences of what they are doing and their sense of self in doing it are rather different. This difference is a function of imagination. As a result, they may be learning very different things from the same activity."<sup>12</sup>

Differing perspectives are clearly evident in writing in *New Era* as educators seek to articulate and clarify their notions of the 'new'. Within articles specifically relating to the arts, many examples can be found. For example, different perspectives of freedom and control were a focus for debate in the special art education issue (July 1922). Again, in the editorials of Ensor

and Neill, contrasts are evident. Ensor addresses the issue of expression:

"Expression through art provides a remarkable index to the degree of freedom of the psyche. The repression of the Victorian age can be clearly seen in the arts of that period. To-day the swing of the pendulum has brought us to the Freudian psychology and the art of the Futurists and the Cubists. Art demands *controlled* expression; the psyche that is truly free is so because it is *self-controlled*."<sup>13</sup>



*Beatrice Ensor, from a portrait in New Era, vol.6, October 1925*

Neill's perspective is initially difficult to encapsulate as the circuitous nature of his writing does not lend itself to brief quotation. Yet, it is this very difference that reflects the contrasting perceptions of "what they are doing and their sense of self in doing it..."<sup>14</sup> Using Wenger's analogy of the stonecutters, while at the level of engagement "they may well be doing exactly the same thing", in terms of encouraging educators to engage with Freudian psychology, in their attempts to give practical meaning to "holding the tool" of Freudian theory, the approaches of Ensor and Neill are quite different.

An example of Neill's writing illustrates this contrast:

"My philosophy about art can be boiled down into this: It is better to be a village butcher and happy than the author of *Dorian Gray* and unhappy. A soul is more important than a book or a picture. And anyway, no work of real art can come from an unhappy personality. No happy man can see green cows or pink beetles, and the people who admire the works of such artists are very possibly as happy as my friend Willie Broon, in Scotland, who sees pink beetles every Saturday night at eleven. With a little more culture Willie might blossom out into a rising Post-Futurist."<sup>15</sup>

Neill's perspective is seen through the eyes of a storyteller. In his use of dramatic contrasts, references to classic literary sources contrasted with "my friend Willie Broon", and his somewhat ironic alignment of Willie with mainstream art movements, Neill illustrates his own imaginative connections and in these are embodied his approach to educational practice.

These differences of perspective need not be seen as dualities, rather, they reflect differing ways of conceptualising art and learning. Here, imagination is central. Wenger emphasises the connection between imagination and creative processes in communities of practice:

"My use of the term [imagination], however, emphasizes the creative process of producing new 'images' and of generating new relations through time and space that become constitutive of the self."<sup>16</sup>

Such a creative process is evident in the reconceptualisation of educational practice illustrated in *New Era*. Frequently, references are made to an educator's own experiences. For example, in an article titled *Education for Life*, Henry Wilson recounts:

"Two men entered the train, one old, one younger, both extremely - well let me say, unattractive, and

after the first momentary glance I returned to my book. But hardly had they seated themselves than the older said, in tones of deep conviction, to the younger: "It's my belief that the root of all our troubles to-day is to be found in lack of imagination." I happened to be at that very moment thinking the same thing, and took it as at once reproof and confirmation."<sup>17</sup>

Here, while we cannot know the particular qualities implied by the adjective "unattractive", Wilson uses his experience to chart his own learning trajectory, illustrating his own temptation to indulge in stereotypes, and his recognition that when he confronts such limitations, he can imagine himself as aligned with a fellow human being through their valuing of the imagination. Wenger addresses the possibility that "imagination can involve stereotypes that overlook the finer texture of practice" and suggests:

Mutual engagement merely creates a shared reality in which to act and construct an identity. Imagination is another process for creating such a reality.<sup>18</sup>

In the example above, Wilson's ability to use his mutual engagement (albeit at some distance) to reflect on his foibles, illustrates an interrelationship through lived experience that involves not only his imagination of 'new' interpersonal relationships, but also suggests in Wenger's terms, the generation of new "images" of social and class relations "through time and space that become constitutive of the self".<sup>19</sup>

In an issue related to freedom and control, a preoccupation with nurturing children's own perceptions of the world and the related issue of the need for teachers to ensure that no models are either implicitly or explicitly presented to the child is the subject of an article in the special edition by Margaret Morris titled *The Natural Foundation of Education*. With an initially romantic perspective, Morris opens:

"I believe that the teaching of the Arts in relation to each other is the essential and natural foundation to education. It is natural because it is helping children to develop what they already possess."<sup>20</sup>

From here, she emphasises the need to avoid children being surrounded by: "designs, patterns and pictures; even if they are good ones. Their first impressions should be from natural objects, and they should try to put them down as *they* see them, and not have the convention of art forced upon them, and be made to see with other people's eyes before they have learnt to see with their own."<sup>21</sup>

Here, while a romantic spirit is evident, Morris's

reasoning is more clearly a reaction to the rigid South Kensington Syllabus for art education in use at this time. While from a twenty-first century perspective, the notion of protecting children from visual influences may seem somewhat reactionary, if not unrealistic, in the light of the context in which this was written, Morris appears to be seeking to develop the case for bringing some psychological insights to art education. She continues:

“*Fear* is the great enemy of creative expression, and the old methods of art teaching are built upon fear, fear of the past. ... With children there is none of this fear to shake off; but it is one of the most tragic things in life, that grown-up people should set to work in all conscientiousness to take from children what they themselves have lost, that wonderful confidence and fearlessness, without which nothing first-class can be achieved.”<sup>22</sup>

In emphasising the need for children to develop their own perceptions however, Morris is not advocating that the teacher leave them to their own devices. Rather, she is explicit about the qualities that teachers need to bring to their engagement with children. Here, she intones Bernard Shaw’s warning and reverses the intent:

“It should be just the reverse: ‘Only those who can do should teach’. All teachers should be still studying, and practising what they teach.”<sup>23</sup>

Throughout her article, as Morris presents an argument for art as a necessary part of life, she is producing new images for educators, generating new perspectives of “natural” connections through art and making transparent her theorising based on her own experiences and her engagement with issues of the day.

The writing of a teacher who sees herself as having rebelled against the school system articulates a perspective of socially constructed learning:

“If, and when, the true education is admittedly an education for ‘Life’, and not merely for ‘Livelihood’, as too long it has been, then the bad old way of teaching (*i.e.* giving a lecture and lesson through already created form, the “knowledge” which the pupil is expected submissively to imbibe) must give way to the encouragement of the creative, developing self-expression of the child. And the teacher must descend from his Godhead to become a mere mortal, a fellow-worker, in some ways a few steps ahead of his pupils - in others, already admittedly behind.”<sup>24</sup>

Mayer tells the story of her response to the “bad old way”, her study of the social context of schools

through psychology and sociology and, using references to contemporary practitioners such as Dalcroze and Montessori, concludes with an impassioned statement regarding the art of living. In recounting her own learning through experience, Mayer exemplifies the ‘new’ teacher searching for new ways to respond to the contemporary context. Recalling Wenger’s story of the stonecutters, Mayer clearly sees her role as an art educator as situated in a far wider context than the mere transmission of knowledge. Her article is evidence of her participation in practice, her identification with the community of educators centred in the New Education Fellowship and, in telling of her own “journey”, her implicit identification with contemporary preoccupations with psychoanalysis and the relevance of personal experience to education is evident.

Reading the section of Ensor’s editorial in this issue in which she addresses the place of the teacher in the contemporary context, a glimpse is evident of her pivotal role in articulating the dilemma of the ‘new’ teachers, such as Morris and Mayer:

“Probably no period of educational endeavor has been so arduous for the teacher as the present transition between the old age and the new. Our teachers are sailing uncharted seas, attempting new methods and yet having to produce old examination results; but upon the success of the teacher the future rests.”<sup>25</sup>

Here, Ensor’s imaginative use of metaphor and her reference to social context produce new “images” as suggested by Wenger. In writing of the teacher in this way, she also appears to be consciously generating new perceptions of relations between teacher and society:

“It is to the teachers of to-day that is given the rare privilege of forming the bridge between the old and the new civilization. Seldom has a people been faced with a future so magnificently charged with new vision and new powers, and never before have we realized so fully how much ultimately depends upon the basic quality of the human character.”<sup>26</sup>

In situating the contemporary teacher in an historical context, Ensor was involved in a process of creating the ‘new’ teacher and of imaginatively visibilising the motivations, the philosophical rationale of the ‘new’ teacher’s engagement with society. In analysing the contributions of teachers such as Mayer and Morris, the nature of the social identification that Ensor was nurturing through the New Education Fellowship becomes clearly evident. Such identification appears to promote a sense of affinity among ‘new’ educators. Art educators were encouraged to see

themselves as having a particularly significant role in the 'new' education through association of self-expression with release of the spirit and with both emotional and intellectual growth.

### Conclusion

These examples from articles that addressed aspects of creativity and self expression, illustrate the role of *New Era* in promoting discourse and debate about 'new' learning. The identification of these educators with aspects of the 'new' in New Education were also significant within the broader perspective of educational change. The extracts above show clearly that the New Education movement was propelled by practitioners searching for new ways to respond to the contemporary context. They illustrate R. J. W. Selleck's observation that the dilemma they faced was to first define their task:

"Called upon to help a nation find itself the teacher answered the call, but no one could tell him what the precise task was."<sup>27</sup>

The New Education Fellowship provided a learning community in which educators sought to define their role in the 'new' within the wider context of an international community of practice.

### References:

- 1 Yvonne Larsson, 'Pioneering Progressive Education, The World Education Fellowship in Australia and the World 1915-87', reprinted from *New Era*, vol. 68, no. 2, 1987. Also Arthur Sandell, *Forum for Sharing of Educational Thinking*, World Education Fellowship, Victorian Section, Melbourne, 1995, pp. 198-264. Sandell outlines the example of the Geelong Section that existed between 1955-1966.
- 2 For example "It should promote collaboration between all members of the community." Larsson *ibid.*, p. 3.
- 3 Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p.125.
- 4 From 1966, the name changed to World Education Fellowship (WEF).The original group that organised the first international conference in Nice, and published the first edition of the journal *New Era* was known as the Fraternity in Education. Larsson, *Pioneering Progressive Education* p. 2.
- 5 *ibid.*, p.3.
- 6 The term 'visibilisation' is used here in reference to deliberate attempts to make work evident through practices. The term is adapted from the work of Y. Engstrom, 'Expansive Visibilisation of Work: An Activity-Theoretical Perspective', *Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, vol. 8, 1999, p.92.

- 7 Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, p. 294, cites the work of cultural historian Benedict Anderson who documented the role of the newspaper in "creating the possibility of a modern nation because it enabled readers to see themselves as part of "imagined communities". A parallel with impact of *New Era* can be drawn as Wenger observes, "This wide distribution of reading material became fodder for imagination, created new connections among people, and gave rise to new possibilities for developing communities based on imagination". For example see *New Era* vol. 3, no. 12, October 1922, pp. 99-102, and vol. 4, no. 13, January 1923, pp. 127-129.
- 8 Beatrice Ensor, 'A New World in the Making', in K. S. Cunningham (ed.), *Education for Complete Living*, Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research, 1938, p. 97.
- 9 Beatrice Ensor, 'Editorial', *New Era*, vol. 3, no. 10, April, 1922, p. 37.
- 10 Ensor, *ibid.*
- 11 Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, outlines this process: "...engagement (is) a threefold process, which includes the conjunction of: 1) the ongoing negotiation of meaning, 2) the formation of trajectories and 3) the unfolding histories of practice...It is in the conjunction of all three processes (of engagement)- as they take place through each other - that engagement becomes a mode of belonging and a source of identity." p. 174.
- 12 *ibid.*, p. 176.
- 13 Beatrice Ensor, 'Editorial', *New Era*, vol. 3 no. 11, July 1922, p. 67, [Italics in the original].
- 14 Wenger, *ibid.*, p. 176.
- 15 A. S. Neill, 'Editorial', *New Era*, vol. 3, no. 11, July 1922, p. 66.
- 16 Wenger, *ibid.*, p. 177.
- 17 Henry Wilson, 'Education for Life', *New Era*, vol. 3, no. 11, July 1922, p. 71.
- 18 Wenger, *ibid.*, p. 177.
- 19 Wenger, *ibid.*
- 20 Margaret Morris, 'The Natural Foundations of Education', *New Era*, vol. 3, no. 11, July 1922, p. 86.
- 21 *ibid.*, p. 86.
- 22 *ibid.* [Italics in the original].
- 23 *ibid.*, p. 87.
- 24 Gladys Mayer, 'Art and Education', *New Era*, vol. 3, no. 11, July, 1922, p. 88.
- 25 Ensor, 'Editorial', *New Era*, vol. 3, no. 11, July 1922, p. 68.
- 26 *ibid.*, p. 68.
- 27 R. J. W. Selleck, *The New Education: The English Background 1870-1914*, Pitman, Melbourne, 1968, p. 338.

*Dr Margaret H. White, from the Australian Centre for Educational Studies, at Macquarie University, Sydney, has been an active member of the WEF New South Wales section.*