

# **TEACHING EDUCATION**

VOL 17

## **Full Title:**

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## **Short Title:**

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**Journal Section: *Research and Scholarship***

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# **Beyond Antagonism? The Discursive Construction of “New” Teachers in the United Arab Emirates**

The UAE, which celebrated independence in 1971, is a rapidly changing environment where aspects of traditional Bedouin culture co-exist with the immense changes being wrought by the forces of globalization and the wealth brought about by the development of the oil industry. Emirati nationals are a minority within the UAE, comprising approximately 20% of the population, and the majority of the school teachers are expatriates drawn from other Arabic speaking countries. Within this context, the Higher Colleges of Technology’s Bachelor of Education degree in Teaching English to Young Learners prepares young UAE national women for English language teaching positions in local government schools. The research presented in this paper is drawn from this two-year study of student teachers and explores the discursive construction of the students’ systems of knowledge and belief. The paper concludes with a critical consideration of the study’s implications and some possible recommendations for teacher education in the UAE that may also have resonance for teacher education programs in other contexts.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is located on the Arabian Peninsula and, like other Gulf states, has seen an enormous increase in wealth over recent decades as a result of the development of the oil industry, bringing immense and rapid changes in most sectors, including education. However, as in other rapidly developing economies, the demand for socioeconomic infrastructure and skilled workers has outstripped the local supply, leading to a reliance on expatriate workers. In education, the demand for teachers to staff the growing school system, which has gone from 74 government schools in 1971 (the year of independence) to over 750 in 2004, has led to an influx of expatriate teachers. In response to this situation, the UAE government has promoted a policy of Emiratization, or nationalization of the workforce. The Higher Colleges of Technology’s (HCT) Bachelor of Education degree in Teaching English to Young Learners (B.Ed.) is one expression of this policy.

Remarkable progress has been made in education, for example, in terms of indicators of levels such as literacy rates, with less than 20% of the population literate prior to independence, in contrast to rates of 75% for women and 70% for men by 2000 (Kazim, 2000). Despite these successes, the UAE’s education system has come in for some rather severe criticisms from both internal and external sources (external: Loughrey, Hughes, Bax, Magness and Aziz, 1999; internal: Taha Thomure, 2003; Mograby, 1999). Dr.

Abdullah Mograby, Head of the Labour and Population Studies Department at the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research has listed the following problems in the UAE school system:

- unclear or conflicting missions and goals, closely related to problems and discrepancies in study programs and curricula
- inappropriate methods of teaching and learning
- inflexible curricula and programs which lead to high drop out rates and long duration of study

Mograby, 1999

The ‘pedagogical gulf’ between existing and aspirational levels of schooling is often expressed discursively in terms of a need to move from ‘traditional’ rote-based, transmission approaches currently practiced in most UAE government schools and classrooms, to ‘progressive’ approaches involving active, experiential learning. Such tensions are exacerbated by the political distance in a relatively stratified society, between the majority, non-Emirati, expatriate teachers and the Emirati student teachers.

Underpinned by notions of the socio-discursive construction of reality (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Foucault, 1971; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Burr, 1995; Howarth, 2000; Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002) and, more specifically, by notions of teaching as a discursively constructed practice (Britzman, 1991; Danielewicz, 2001), this paper is based on a two-year study of the discursive construction of the first cohort of students to graduate from the degree as members of an evolving ‘Community of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Within this discursive theoretical framework, it focuses on the extraordinary uptake of Educational discourses by the student teachers. After briefly outlining the research method that guided the study, the paper offers a socio-discursive reading of the contemporary UAE, prior to the main discussion, involving an examination of the take-up of educational discourses by some of the first cohort of graduates from the degree, and a consideration of how this might be interpreted within the social and educational developmental context and in light of some of the theoretical insights offered by discourse theory.

### **The research methodology**

The data for the study that forms the basis of this paper was gathered over a two year period (2002–4) of working with the first cohort of students to complete the degree. Building on Kvale’s (1996: 37) notion of conversation as “the social justification of belief”, the majority of the data was collected through two forms of ‘conversation’: corporeal, face-to-face conversations in the form of researcher-led focus groups; and virtual, student-led Web Course Tool (Web CT) conversations. This data was coded to identify key lexical items or ‘nodes’ structuring the students’ discourse. Discursive construction was explored at various levels including the student teachers’ systems of knowledge and belief; the intrapersonal identity of one student teacher; and the interpersonal, social relationships among members of the student teachers’ community. The focus here is on the discursive construction of the community’s systems of knowledge and belief. (Data from the Web CT postings is referenced using the format: *Student (pseudonym), Topic title, Thread title* [‘Re’ indicates response]; Data from focus groups is referenced as *FG*.)

### **The UAE socio-discursive context**

Kazim (2000) presents a reading of UAE history and society in which successive “sociodiscursive formations” have involved both continuities and discontinuities with the preceding formation(s), as society in each period strives to reproduce itself. Examples of such continuities are the political structures of hereditary rule, the economic structures of agriculturalism, mercantilism and industrialism and the sociocultural structures of language, art, food, dress and religious beliefs. Other aspects of earlier periods are reconstructed within the contemporary formation to serve its reproduction, for example, camel racing (for a discussion of the reconstruction of the ‘tradition’ of camel racing, see Khalaf, 2000; see Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1992 for a wider discussion of “invented traditions”), urban sculptures of coffee pots, pearl shells and sailing dhows, and traditional Bedouin ‘tents’ located in the marbled atria of hotels and shopping malls. At the same time the contemporary period has its own constructions in each of these areas, for example, a Federal government which develops foreign policy and issues passports in

the political sphere, sophisticated oil, tourism and banking industries linked to globalization in the economic sphere. Other constructions of the contemporary period are the health and education systems.

Reflecting the thrusts of these continuities, changing patterns and new constructions, Kazim identifies three discourses operating in the contemporary UAE, which he describes as the “conservative”, “progressive” and “moderate” discourses; the first seeking to preserve past patterns, the second embracing globalization, while the third seeks a balance between the first two (Kazim, 2000: 434). All three discourses are accommodated by UAE policy makers as each contributes in different ways to the socio-discursive reproduction of the contemporary UAE social formation (Kazim, 2000: 452-456).

### **Discourses in teacher education**

Teaching is a complex achievement that brings together theory and practice, knowledge and action, intellect and emotion, individual experience and social context. One way of embracing this complexity is to recognize that education generally, and teaching specifically, involves an “amalgam” of discourses that are appropriated and synthesized (Coldron and Smith, 1995), a “mélange of past, present and future meanings that are continually being renegotiated through social interaction” (Miller Marsh, 2003: 6) in the process of learning to teach. In this view, the task of learning to teach is to create, through this process of discursive appropriation and synthesis, a coherent ‘teaching self’ (Danielewicz, 2001).

The HCT B.Ed. degree draws on a range of varied discursive resources, including the experience, knowledge, beliefs and skills, both local and international, of the many people who have been involved in the degree’s development, as well as resources in the literature on models for language teaching and language teacher education, and on teaching and teacher education generally. Overall, our approach to teacher education at the HCT is underpinned by notions ultimately derived from sociocultural theory, including: collaborative inquiry, as students engage in group projects over extended

periods; assisted performance, as teachers and peers help students develop within their zone of proximal development; and reflective dialogue, as students engage in educational conversations, via online discussion boards or reflective journals. Through these means, students and teachers continually co-construct situated knowledge within particular social and cultural contexts, with both individuals and the environment changing as a result of this dialogic interaction (sources are too many to list but some key titles include Wells, 1999, on dialogic inquiry in Education; Lantolf, 2000, on sociocultural approaches to language learning and teaching; Cameron, 2001, on teaching young language learners; and Korthagen, 2001, on linking practice and theory in teacher education). These emphases are reflected in extended, integrated, collaborative projects, which are linked to the students' work in schools and which serve as vehicles for learning, while simultaneously modeling possibilities for the school language classroom. This overall approach, with its focus on collaboration and active inquiry, is characterized by students as 'progressive' in contrast to the 'traditional' approaches they experienced during their own schooling.

The discursive 'threads' that the HCT Emirati students in the Bachelor of Education in Teaching English to Young Learners are working with are multiple and complex, and in many ways in tension with each other. For example, English language teaching is inseparable from discourses of colonialism (Pennycook, 1998), associations which have inevitably been rekindled by the recent US lead invasion of Iraq. Yet English is also valued within UAE society, and recognized as such by the students, as key to the project of nation-building and to positioning the UAE within global society (Kazim, 2000; Block and Cameron, 2002; Davidson, 2005). Indeed, English is linked in many students' minds to new educational approaches; as one student in the B.Ed. program commented, "English was taught differently. It wasn't taught in the traditional way." English is also viewed as a prestige subject: "So if you are teaching English, you have special ability. You should be excellent to be an English teacher."

The B.Ed. students in this study thus value the challenge of studying in English and accept the need for students in schools to learn English, yet they are also keenly

protective of local culture and traditions. During focus group discussions, some students commented on the assumption of cultural superiority that accompanies English language teaching. For example, “When we were in schools, we were told that we should learn English because it would make us better human beings.” Further arguing for the need to learn English to ‘talk back’ to English language cultures, this student teacher went on to comment, “Now what I want to do is teach my students English so they can tell others that we are good human beings. I want them to communicate our ideas, our culture.”

Striking a balance between encouraging English and cultural preservation is a source of potential tension for B.Ed. students. There are also potential tensions between the ‘traditional’ model of teaching the students experienced in their own schooling, and see in many of the classrooms they teach in during their eight teaching practice rounds (totaling 36 weeks), and the ‘progressive’ sociocultural model the students see in college and in the teaching practice rounds they complete in international schools. An added source of possible tension derives from the fact that the expatriate teachers that the HCT relies on to supervise teaching placements are the ones the students will eventually replace as part of the Emiratization process.

Yet, despite these multiple sources of potential tension, a surprising result that transpired during the study was the remarkable coherence and consistency of the student teachers’ emergent ‘teaching selves’ (Danielewicz, 2001), as reflected in their commitment to a common set of pedagogical beliefs and in the strength of their evolving ‘community of practice’. These aspects reflect the three constitutive levels of discourse in terms of individual identities, systems of knowledge and belief, and interpersonal relations (Fairclough, 1992, 2003). In the section below I outline the main contours of these emergent teaching selves and exploring the reasons behind the remarkable consistency of these student teachers’ views.

### **The discursive construction of “new” teachers**

The HCT Bachelor of Education degree is social constructivist in orientation (Wells, 1999, 2001; Daniels, 2001; Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev and Miller, 2003; McInerney and Van Etten, 2003), emphasizing the interrelationship between practical experience and theoretical investigation, and viewing knowledge as co-constructed by students and teachers through dialogic interaction and inquiry. We hope that graduates from the degree will make significant differences to the ways students learn in UAE schools as well as having the skills and knowledge to contribute to future improvements in curriculum and educational practice in the UAE. Certainly, the students reported having few problems in terms of their confidence in themselves as agents of educational change:

Moving towards a more student-centered, active approach in all aspects of teaching is I believe the mission of the B.Ed. program. In this way students take 'ownership' of their learning, which has the potential to make them more motivated, pro-active and interested learners. Passive learning belongs to the past.

Sara, Dealing with Challenging Behaviour: Re: Dealing with Misbehaviours

One of the characteristic discursive strategies employed by the HCT's student teachers is the establishment of a series of strong binary oppositions, such as active/passive learning, teacher-centered/student-centered and the past/future, that serve to define, establish, maintain and monitor their community. These binaries revolve around a core opposition between the 'new' teacher, who uses 'new' or 'modern' teaching methods and approaches, and the 'traditional' teacher, who uses 'traditional' methods and approaches in the classroom. The 'traditional' teachers include both the majority of the teachers the students experienced in the 'then' of their own schooling, as well as the majority of the supervising school teachers (SSTs) they have worked with during their teaching placements in the 'there' of government schools; while 'new' or modern' teaching is defined in terms of the approaches they have encountered during the 'now' of their years of study on the HCT B.Ed. degree within the 'here' of college, and which they intend to implement in UAE government schools. Hence the students invest significantly in an



‘us/them’ discursive divide between themselves and the teachers they will be working alongside.

For one student teacher, twelve years of belief in what were once viewed as ‘perfect methods’ were reported to be overthrown in just a few months of study:

Throughout twelve years of being a student in school, I had always thought that the best methods in making the students understand the lesson were through using the traditional methods such as memorizing... However, in the first couple of months in the B.Ed., all my beliefs about these perfect methods changed.

Nafisah, Beliefs About Teaching: What are the appropriate methods to use in our classrooms?

Such is the prevalence of this expressed commitment to the ‘new’, as well as the personal and professional passion with which the students testify to their belief in it, that it is often possible to talk in terms of a ‘conversion’. We see this personalized transformation in a number of postings of which the following is a typical example: “Now I can say it and I can say it in a loud voice MY WHOLE LIFE HAS CHANGED” (*How Teaching Has Changed My Life: I Love Teaching, emphasis in original*). Admittedly, some students, while still embracing change wholeheartedly, did present their conversion to new teaching beliefs in less dramatic fashion:

My beliefs at this stage were somehow old-fashioned approaches that school teachers used to utilize. Lessons were viewed as teacher-centered classes where the teacher dictates the knowledge to students. Now I know that learner-centered classes are the best environments to improve students’ learning in which the students are allowed to expand and explore their own knowledge.

Halma, Beliefs about teaching: My beliefs have changed in stages

Nevertheless, the elements of revelation and testimonial with regard to past errant beliefs and wholehearted acceptance of new beliefs (“now I know”) are still present here. These

testimonies involve a discursive strategy of drawing a passionate and personal, as well as professional, ‘line in the sand’ between the ‘new’, teachers that characterize the B.Ed. student teachers’ community of practice and ‘traditional’ teachers and teaching. At times this desire for distinction spills over into antagonism towards the ‘traditional’ teachers in the government schools: “I hope that those days don’t come back again and I hope that these kind of teachers DON’T EXIST AGAIN IN THE WORLD AT ALL... (*Nashita, 449, Beliefs About Teaching: Re: Change of name, emphasis in original*). Similar sentiments are evident in other students’ comments, in addition to a measure of relief: “We thought that we would be as our teachers but thanks, no. Thanks to God we are not like them” (*Nabila, FG*).

These are strongly worded antagonisms and a number of possible reasons behind them are explored in the following section. First, however, it is worth noting that a number of further distinctions support this major discursive opposition between the ‘traditional’ teachers of the past and the ‘new’ teachers of the present and future. Students are treated with insensitivity or cruelty in the ‘traditional’ classroom whereas sensitivity, kindness and a concern for the whole student and their individual needs is the *modus operandi* for the ‘new’ teacher. In ‘traditional’ classrooms, learning is passive and learners display low motivation and self esteem, whereas ‘new’ classrooms involve active learning by motivated learners with positive self esteem. Other oppositions focus on the way that the ‘new’ classroom is characterized by equality, whereas rigid hierarchy dominates the traditional classroom. Teaching in the ‘traditional’ classrooms is an ‘easy’, straightforward business involving transmission of knowledge, whereas in ‘new’, learner-centered classrooms it is complex and challenging and the teacher is a facilitator. These binary oppositions, as represented in the discourse of the student teachers in the HCT’s Bachelor of Education, are outlined below:

**Traditional Paradigm**

The past  
 Passive learning  
 Teacher-centered  
 Insensitivity / cruelty  
 Learners as a homogenous

**New Paradigm**

The future  
 Active learning  
 Student/learner/child-centered  
 Sensitivity / kindness  
 Learners as heterogeneous

Low motivation & self esteem  
Hierarchy  
Teacher as transmitter  
Teaching as easy  
Them

High motivation and self esteem  
Equality  
Teacher as facilitator  
Teaching as complex  
Us

Operating here is a powerful ideological positioning that largely constructs the students' community of practice, through this set of binary oppositions, in contradistinction to and at times in antagonism towards, past and present teachers in government schools. The questions remain, however, as to why the students have been so wholeheartedly receptive to the educational discourses of modern progressive pedagogy and whether this receptivity and commitment remains robust and durable into graduate teaching. While the latter issue is a topic for further research, the first question is explored below.

### **Identities and discourse**

In considering the ways the students' construct their identities and their community, there are some clear connections to wider social discourses operating in the contemporary UAE that can be identified. In particular, the students' embrace of educational change and modern pedagogy resonates with Kazim's (2000) 'progressive' discourse and its concern with positioning the UAE advantageously in the new global economy. But assuming for the sake of argument that the progressive educational discourses are in the interests of UAE education, a number of issues immediately suggest themselves: in relation to the practical difficulties the students are likely to face in trying to bridge the gulf between the practices that characterize their beliefs and the practices currently predominating in government schools; in relation to the potential struggle that the students are likely to face to maintain their current beliefs as they take up roles within an environment and a set of practices predicated upon a different and contrary set of educational beliefs; and in relation to the interpersonal challenges they are likely to encounter in working alongside the teachers in those schools, given the construction of antagonistic relations in the predominant discourse of the student teachers' community of practice that we have observed. These topics all warrant further research as the first cohort of HCT-trained teachers prepared at the HCT commence their careers.

Still the question remains as to why the students have been so powerfully receptive to discourses of progressive education, which are so at odds with the ‘traditional’ schooling they themselves experienced in the past. Given their protective feelings towards their own culture and the gap between progressive educational theory and current practice in local schools, a reasonably anticipated reaction might have been of skepticism and even rejection. One obvious factor in the students’ positive embrace of what we have described as ‘new’ approaches to education, is their immersion in them as part of a teacher education program that models this progressive pedagogy. This is a reason that came through time and time again in student comments as they contrasted the approaches they experienced at college with those they recollected from school. It may also be that the ‘missionistic’ rhetoric that underpins progressive approaches, maps readily onto the mission and rhetoric of nation building that is part of the Emiratization project. Youthful naivety may have a role to play too.

But another possible insight is offered by the findings of a recent study with Jewish and Arab teacher education students in Israel (Eilam, 2002, 2003) describing the powerful uptake of theory on the part of the Arab students and speculating on the source of their strong confidence in the ability to relate theory to practice: “The Arab educational milieu, which traditionally involves firm discipline and grants teachers high status and respect, may have encouraged Muslim Arab students to believe more in their ability to successfully apply what they had learned” (2003: 180). The eager, wholehearted acceptance of progressive theory coupled with, indeed intensified by, criticism of their own schooling resonates with findings in Eilam’s earlier study: “The difficulties the Arabs had experienced in learning made them invest much more energy into making sense of and trying to apply the new knowledge” (Eilam, 2002: 1695). Harold, McNally and McAskill (2002: 7) report similar findings among teacher education students at Zayed University in the UAE.

Thus the students’ may critique their schooling because it was at odds with the approaches to education they have encountered in their degree, but ironically, it may also

be that the students' backgrounds in a "teacher-centered" milieu contributes to their ready acceptance of "student-centered" approaches. We should be wary, however, of reading their penchant for dichotomous schema as unique to this context. Hinchman and Oyler note a rejection of ambiguity and a "desire not only for stability but also for what we called Utopian harmony" among their North American student teachers (Hinchman and Oyler, 2000: 503). The authors acknowledge the function of dichotomies in reducing the tensions inherent in uncertainty, but urge teacher educators to cultivate an appreciation of contingencies, contradictions and ironies in student teachers, so as to guard against susceptibility to overly coherent constructions of pedagogical 'reality'. However, it may be that the HCT students' 'oppositional affiliation' (Danielewicz, 2001) reflects an essential dynamic operating in the discursive construction of meaning and identity, which we can best understand by considering Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) logics of equivalence and difference.

Within Discourse Theory, meaning focuses around 'logics of equivalences' and 'logics of differences'; however, these are not given or fixed (Torfing, 1999; Howarth, 2000; Andersen, 2003). An Emirati student teacher may see herself as equivalent to an Egyptian teacher insofar as they are both non-western, Arabic speakers and fellow professionals in the field of education, or she may focus on her UAE nationality as a source of distinction and difference; which logic prevails is the very stuff of politics. The logic of equivalence will strive to delimit and dissolve difference by creating 'chains of equivalence'; yet because meaning and identity are necessarily differential, the operation of a logic of equivalence is always operationalized through the construction of a purely negative opposite.

As we have seen, for the student teachers' community, meaning revolves around a constructed opposition between 'traditional' and 'new' or 'progressive' teaching, which, though necessarily temporary and contingent, have achieved a degree of naturalization, becoming hegemonic among the community members. The individual and community identities involved are built up through 'chains of equivalence' between the elements of 'new' or 'progressive' teaching, such as the teacher as 'facilitator', 'student-centered'

classrooms and ‘active’ learning etc. The meaning of these elements is dependent upon their opposites (‘transmitter’, ‘teacher-centered’ etc.), together forming an opposite chain of equivalence. This opposite chain serves to distinguish the students from the government school teachers by comprising the ‘constitutive outside’ that offers the condition of possibility for construction of the identities in question (Torfing, 1999: 124).

Within this discursive construction of hegemonic meaning and identities, the two chains of equivalence, (lining up with ‘new versus ‘traditional’ teaching) are mutually exclusive, in that it is impossible to be a ‘new’ and a ‘traditional’ teacher at the same time, or for the classroom to be a site of both ‘new’ and ‘traditional’ teaching. This is reflected in thread titles that set the concerns of the government school teachers in opposition to those of the student teachers’ community, such as ‘Discipline versus Learning’. As a consequence of this pattern – and we can see this in thread titles such as ‘My supervising school teacher is the problem’ – the ‘traditional’ teachers are constructed as – and resented for – ‘blocking’ the full fruition of the student teachers’ identities as ‘new’ teachers (Howarth, 2000: 106-7).

### **From antagonism to *agonism***

A situation of hostility between student teachers and government school teachers is unlikely to be in the interests of either party. It also runs the risk of fusing with other constructed differences such as that between Emirati nationals and expatriate Arabs, entrenching oppositional stances and leading to situations of mutual resentment, thus obstructing possibilities for cooperation and collaboration. Additionally, a sustained pattern of negative, antagonistic expression towards government schools and teachers is not a healthy state of affairs for the student teachers themselves. One way to surmount the latent and sometimes explicit antagonism that we have seen in the discourse of the student teachers’ community of practice is to promote what Laclau and Mouffe describe as an *agonistic* approach, which “acknowledges the real nature of its frontiers and the forms of exclusion they entail, instead of trying to disguise them under the veil of rationality or morality” (Mouffe, 2000: 105). Yet while antagonism entails an us/them

relation in which those we disagree with are our ‘enemies’, agonism sees them transformed into ‘adversaries’ whose legitimacy is accepted (Mouffe, 2005: 20). This would entail moving beyond characterizations of teaching as good and bad, but rather, seeing education and schools, teachers and students, teaching and learning, within a wider sociodiscursive perspective. A few of the students moved towards such a position as they tentatively challenged the frontiers established by the community’s predominant discourse:

On the other hand, I want to draw your attention to another issue. We were taught how to create a positive learning environment and we got the chance to see the effectiveness of using child-centered activities through going out to schools and teaching. We were introduced to many educational theories and got the opportunities to put them into practice. Government schools teachers did not get that chance though.

Asiya, Insights from the Internship: Re: What is an effective learning environment in views of the principal and teachers in the school?!

Here Asiya recognizes the contingency of the community’s discourse, which allows her to evince empathy with the government teachers rather than constructing them in adversarial terms. This insight is related to an aspect of agonism, in the form of *nomadization*, involving “the attempt to undercut the allegiance of a specific identity to a certain place or a certain property, and thereby to show that all identities are constructed in and through hegemonic power struggles” (Torfing, 1999: 255). This emphasis on developing awareness of the discursive construction of all identities resonates with Gee’s recent urging of the need for language teachers to become ‘masters’ of the ‘political geography of discourses’ (Gee, 2004: 30). This implies the need for teacher education programs in general, and the HCT B.Ed. in particular, to encourage student teachers to develop an awareness of the ways in which their own understanding is continuously being constructed in and through discourse and to see in turn the constructed-ness of other understandings.

In terms of practice with future cohorts of HCT student teachers, one possible approach for promoting such an empathetic understanding of the school teachers could be to have the students complete a detailed profile of one of their supervising school teachers, documenting issues like why they chose teaching, how and what they studied to become a teacher, their career path to date, their goals for the future and their concerns about teaching and education in the UAE. This could position the government school teachers as knowledgeable and concerned professionals who have a vision of how education might be improved, which in turn might serve to complicate the student teachers' dominant and somewhat one-dimensional view of current teachers as guardians of 'traditional' teaching and obstacles to change. The profile might help the student teachers gain insights into the struggles faced by expatriate teachers, on tenuous one year renewable contracts, paid half the salary of UAE national teachers and with limited options in their 'home' country. This might assist in helping the student teachers' community acknowledge "the real nature of its frontiers and the forms of exclusion they entail" in order to move beyond "the veil of rationality or morality" (Mouffe 2000: 105 cited above) that constructs the 'problems' of UAE education in purely pedagogical, rather than political, terms.

Another element of agonism that offers the potential to move beyond the oppositional impasse is the promotion of an understanding of *hybridity* – of the multiple elements comprising our identities – to enable student teachers to focus upon what they have in common with the school teachers as women, as professionals, as Arabic speakers etc. rather than only seeing differences. In this way students are encouraged to see that the 'cut' on reality offered through the dominant discourse, that constructs them in oppositional terms, is only one of many possibilities for identity construction. This entails the *deconstruction* of the framework the students have constructed around the binary opposition between 'good and 'bad', 'modern' and 'traditional' teaching. There is an ethical component to this call for deconstruction and recognition of hybridity, since by resisting closure it resists the construction of the 'other' as merely the constitutive outside or as the negative side of a binary opposition. "Deconstruction thus acts ethically against any attempt to instigate a metaphysical closure of self-identity by denying the demanding (non-) presence of the wholly Other" (Torfing 1999: 280). Recognition of hybridity thus



entails continual openness towards an 'other' who, like the 'self', is necessarily heterogeneous. Again, strategies such as the profiling sketched above, along with others directed towards the creation of a learning community embracing student teachers, college teachers and school teachers, might assist the student teachers in resisting the temptation to reduce the government school teachers to the 'other' of 'bad', 'traditional' or 'teacher-centered' teachers but rather to see them in the context of wider social, cultural, economic and political structures and pressures that position them – and all teachers – in particular ways.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has been based on the first substantive study of a new teacher education program at the Higher Colleges of Technology in the United Arab Emirates. This new program graduated its first teachers in June 2004 and the study's implications are currently being considered by HCT faculty and administrators. As noted earlier, the degree of coherence within the students' teaching community is quite remarkable. Indeed, this coherence is also a concern, in that its constitution - embodying as we have seen 'new' or 'progressive' teaching approaches - is premised on the 'constitutive outside' - the 'other' - of the 'traditional' teacher. Over time it is quite possible that this oppositional affiliation of the HCT's student teachers will be naturally reduced, as the school system moves towards the beliefs and values of the student teachers' community, and as the student teachers move on to become teachers, populating the field with more congenial educational discourses and practices. The overall effect of these developments will likely be to reduce the "frontier effect". Nevertheless, these changes will take time and therefore, in terms of identity formation of future cohorts of HCT student teachers, it is important to consider strategies, such as those suggested above, so the students can be assisted in the performance of authoring identities that move beyond the oppositional affiliation and so reduce the potential for antagonistic relations.

The elements of an agonistic politics could encourage students to view the teachers in terms of what unites rather than what divides them and to look from a position of shared empathy for common sources of inspiration for action and collaboration. Implementing,

monitoring and evaluating the success of strategies to promote an agonistic approach would be a valuable topic for further research.

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