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***“...Nothing’s Lost. Or else, All is Translation.
And Every bit of us is Lost in it...”***

**Informal Collaborative Learning amongst
University Students in Cameroon**

A Case Study

Submitted by

MICHEL AUGUSTE TCHOUMBOU NGANTCHOP

in fulfilment of the Degree

Doctorate in Education

University of Sussex, United Kingdom

October 2016



Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree.

Signature:.....

Dedication

to

Christian Cardinal Tumi

my seer in grace

Acknowledgements

I here express my sincere gratitude to those without whose kindness and support this work would never have reached completion. I am immensely indebted to Dr Joanna Lisa Westbrook, my main supervisor, whose extraordinary patience in nurturing the seminal ideas of this thesis, and whose persistent support through valuable and timely feedback brought this thesis to final shape. Also, I thank my second supervisor, Dr Julia Sunderland, for her genuine interest in this research and for providing prompt and valuable feedback that brought forth more substance to the work.

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Lost in Translation

*But nothing's lost.
Or else: all is translation
And every bit of us is lost in it...
And in that loss a self-effacing tree,
Color of context, imperceptibly
Rustling with its angel,
turns the waste
To shade and fiber, milk and memory...*

(James Merrill (1926-1995))

Summary

**«Nothing's Lost. Or else: All is Translation. And Every bit of us is Lost in it...»
Informal Collaborative Learning Among University Students in Cameroon.
-A Case Study-**

Michel Auguste TCHOUMBOU NGANTCHOP

Doctorate in Education

University of Sussex

Cameroon university students are drawn to informal small group talks as a highly valued learning strategy, particularly in relation to assessment. This research investigates this practice in-depth as an 'instance in action,' with academic, social and cultural implications in the life of the average university learner in Cameroon. Showing the methodological limitations of current discourses on student group talks in higher education teaching and learning, the study draws from bakhtinian 'dialogism' to underpin analysis of students' talks and interactions. Data were collected through extended observation of several small groups in three different universities in Cameroon, across several disciplinary fields, levels of undergraduate learning, linguistic and social boundaries.

Findings suggest that in the process of talking and interacting informally, that is, outside of the formal structure of the classroom, learners strategically position themselves in ways that allow their individual and collective voices to emerge. Sustained in the context of discourse, emerging voices create the *dialogic space* within which learners construct their understandings of disciplinary knowledge. For it is within the dialogic space that learners, through their voices, best relate to assessment demands, to expected learning outcomes and to the social and cultural contexts of learning in Cameroon.

This work contributes to knowledge by underlining the importance of learning spaces in higher education, particularly in relation to learners' voices and expected active engagement with learning. As such, it highlights the potentials of informal collaborative learning to enhance the learning experience in Cameroon universities, particularly in relation to assessment and critical thinking. Hence, it provides grounds for claims that Cameroonian students, and generally learners in other similar contexts, are usually more independent thinkers. This offers reasonable basis for questioning existing presumptions around 'academic inferiority' of 'foreign' students in some institutions abroad; presumptions that have continued to widen existing gaps between western universities and competing institutions in developing contexts. In addition, it foregrounds subsequent inquiries on learners' identities in Cameroon universities. Methodological innovations in investigating unconventional learning practices, particularly with the use of information technology, are also highlighted.

Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Summary	v
Table of Contents	vi
Table of Tables	x
Table of Figures.....	xi
Table of Pictures.....	xii
Transcription Convention	xiii
Abbreviations.....	xiv
CHAPTER ONE	
<i>“LOST IN TRANSLATION”: GENERAL INTRODUCTION.....</i>	1
1. Introduction	1
1.1 ‘Informal Collaborative Learning’ in Higher Education	1
1.2 Background of Study	7
1.2.1 Research Aims	8
1.3 Rationale	8
1.4 Research Question.....	10
1.5 Structure of this Thesis	13
CHAPTER TWO	
<i>“NOTHING’S LOST”: CONTEXT OF STUDY.....</i>	14
2.1 Introduction.....	14
2.2 The Cameroon Context	14
2.3 Education Policy in Cameroon	19
2.4 Context of Informal Collaborative Learning in Cameroon Universities	20
2.4.1 Structural Context of Informal Collaborative Learning.....	20
2.4.2 Institutional Factors	21

2.4.3	Massification of Higher Education in Cameroon	21
2.4.4	Institutional Teaching and Learning Practices	23
2.4.5	National Policies on Higher Education in Cameroon	24
2.4.6	The International Context of University Learning in Cameroon	27
2.4.7	Conclusion.....	28

CHAPTER THREE

<i>“OR ELSE: ALL IS TRANSLATION”: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE</i>		30
3.1	Introduction	30
3.2	Conceptualising ‘Informal’ Learning Experiences.....	30
3.2.1	Assessment and Students’ Learning Practices.....	30
3.2.2	Preliminary Concept: ‘Collaborative Learning’	32
3.2.3	Pedagogic Underpinnings of Collaborative Learning.....	34
3.2.4	Beyond Rules of Language and Grammar.....	38
3.2.5	Discourse Analysis: Language of Informal Learning.....	40
3.3	Claiming ‘Informal’ Learning Spaces	43
3.3.1	Substantive and Epistemological Considerations	43
3.3.2	‘Informal’ Collaborative Learning as ‘Dialogic’ Space	45
3.3.3	Bakhtin’s Concept of Dialogue	45
3.3.4	Conceptualizing Informal Space as Dialogic Space	50
3.4	Strategic Self-Positioning: An Analytical Framework.....	54

CHAPTER FOUR

<i>“OR ELSE, ALL IS TRANSLATION”: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS.....</i>		57
4.1	Introduction	57
4.2	Methodological Underpinnings	57
4.3	Research Design.....	60
4.3.1	Research Strategy: Multi-site Case Study.....	60
4.3.2	Research Context and Participants.....	62

4.3.2.1 Profile of Research Sites	62
4.3.2.2 Profile of Participating Groups and Participants	64
4.3.3 Research Methods and Instruments	66
4.3.3.1 Participant Observation	67
4.3.3.2 Focus Group Interviews	69
4.3.3.3 Integrated use of Audio Recording, Video Recording and Photos	70
4.4 Fieldwork and Transcription	72
4.5 Data Analysis.....	74
4.6 Ethical Issues.....	77
4.7 Reliability	78
4.8 Limitations of Research	80
4.9 Transferability.....	80
4.10 Conclusion.....	81
CHAPTER FIVE: “<i>RUSTLING WITH ITS ANGELS</i>”	
PEDAGOGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF INFORMAL COLLABORATIVE	
LEARNING	82
5.1 Introduction	82
5.2 The Pedagogic Relevance of Informal Collaborative Learning	83
5.2.1 The Agency of the Learner’s Voice	83
5.2.2 Assessment and Informal Collaborative Learning	98
CHAPTER SIX: “<i>THE IMPERCEPTIBLE COLOUR OF CONTEXT</i>”	
SOCIO-CULTURAL FEATURES OF INFORMAL COLLABORATIVE	
LEARNING	118
6.1 Introduction	118
6.2 The Agency of Learners’ Voices and Sociocultural Representations.....	118
6.2.1 Voice and Power	122
6.2.2 Voice, Power and Knowledge	122
6.2.3 Voice, Power and Institutions.....	123

6.2.4 Voice, Power and Language of Learning.....	124
6.2.2 Voice and Group Socialization	128
6.2.3 Voice and Identities: Gender, Professional and Spiritual Identities.....	133
6.2.3.1 Voice and Gender	134
6.2.3.2 Voice and Professional Identity	136
6.2.3.3 Voice and Spiritual Identity	138
6.3 Conclusion	141
CHAPTER SEVEN: “TO SHADE AND FIBER, MILK AND MEMORY”	
DISCUSSIONS, REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSION.....	142
7.1 Introduction.....	142
7.2 Key Findings.....	143
7.2.1 Informal Collaborative Learning as Dialogic Space	143
7.3 Contribution to existing body of knowledge	156
7.4 Practical Implications of this Study	159
7.4.1 Implication for Teaching and Learning	159
7.4.2 On Curriculum Development, Assessment and Education Planning.....	162
7.4.3 Social Spaces and Learning	165
7.5 Critical Reflection.....	167
7.6 Further Research.....	170
7.7 Conclusion	171
BIBLIOGRAPHY	173
APPENDICES	xiv
Appendix 2.1: Linguistic-Ethnographic Map of Cameroon.....	xiv
Appendix 2.2: The Impact of International Agendas on Education in Cameroon	xv
Appendix 4.1: Certificate of Approval for Research	xvii
APPENDIX 4.2: Group Observation Portfolio	xviii
APPENDIX 4.3: Focus Group Interviews Protocol	xix

APPENDIX 4.4: Observation Notes on Group Interaction.....	xxiii
APPENDIX 5.1: Extended Data Analysis	xxiv
APPENDIX 5.2: Further Analysis on the Collective Use of Voice.....	xxv
APPENDIX 5.3 : Full Transcript On The Formative Expansion Knowledge.....	xxvi
APPENDIX 5.4: Full Transcription of Illustrative Texts on Metacognition	xxvii

Table of Tables

Table 1: Profile of universities included in this research.....	64
Table 2: Number of participants from UB groups visited	66
Table 3: CU groups visited or recorded more than five times	66
Table 4: Formative expansion of shared knowledge	112

Table of Figures

Figure 1: Political map of Cameroon.....	18
Figure 2: Stuctural Context of Informal Learning in Cameroon	21
Figure 3: Embodiment of Voice.	86
Figure 4: Contetual Embodiment of Voice.....	92
Figure 5: Interweaving Context of Discourse.....	64
Figure 6: Content Focus Learning.	147
Figure 7: Dialogic Circle.	149
Figure 8: Dialogic Detour.....	150

Table of Pictures

Picture #1-3: Massive Classroom Learning (1)	2
Picture #4: Informal Learning (1)	3
Picture #5: Informal Learning (2)	4
Picture #6: Informal Learning (3)	5
Picture #7: Teaching in Massive Classroom	22
Picture #8: Informal Learning Space (1)	80
Picture #9: Informal Learning Space (2)	97
Picture #10: Spirituality in Informal Learning Space	141
Picture #11: Informal Learning Space (3)	145
Picture #12: Informal Learning Space (4)	146
Picture #13: Massive Classroom Learning (2)	153
Picture #14: Informal Learning Space (5)	154
Picture #15: Recreational Space	162
Picture #16: Recreational Space used for Informal Learning	163

Transcription Convention

...	Segments omitted here for space constraints
(1)	Pause in number of seconds
(.)	Pause of less than 1 second
[]	Overlapping speech
=	Latching
wo::rd	Extended sound
<u>word</u>	Emphasis
.	Falling intonation
?	Rising intonation
((laughs))	Non-verbal behaviour
[xx]	Unclear segment
(word)	Inserted clarifications

Abbreviations

Abbr.	Meaning	Comment
Amphi	Amphitheatre	Lecture Hall
CM	Cameroon	
CO ₂	Carbon Dioxide	
CU	A university in English speaking Cameroon	
CUIB	A university in English speaking Cameroon	
EFA	Education for all	
Exam	Examination	
GCE	General Certificate of Education	
HIPC	Heavily Indebted Poor Country	
IMF	International monetary fund	
IZD	Intermental Zone of Development	
IPA	Interpretative-phenomenological framework	
HIV	Human Immune Deficiency Virus	
LMD	Licence Masters and Doctorate Certification	
MINESUP	Ministry of Higher Education Cameroon	
NIS	National Institute for Statistics	
MDG	Millennium Development Goal	
UB	A university in English Speaking Cameroon	
UD	A university in French Speaking Cameroon	
UNESCO	United Nation Education and Scientific Cooperation	
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development	

CHAPTER ONE

***“LOST IN TRANSLATION”*: GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

1. Introduction

1.1 ‘Informal Collaborative Learning’ in Higher Education

Below I present descriptive vignettes of different scenario of university students learning experience in Cameroon.

Scenario #1:

It is regular school hours, right before the first class at 7:00 am and right before the lecturer walks in. The amphitheatre, ‘*Amphi 650*’, is packed with students; seats are jammed to full capacity (Photo #1, #2, #3). A good number of students are lined up against the side walls of the hall, note books and pens in hand, facing the chalkboard, in expectation of the first lesson on their timetable. Dress code reflects decency and modesty; Male students in casual T-shirts over jeans and female students with a variety of, in some cases, exuberant hair styles, all suggesting that the context requires a standardized physical appearance.

Lectures will begin as soon as the lecturer arrives. The latter will stand at the presentation area at the front of the amphitheatre and will engage students either in the form of a prepared discourse on a particular topic or through some other form of interaction like presentations by students, open questions or discussion. But given the massive number of students in the class, the lecturer will likely read from his notes and the students will listen, if they are comfortably seated they will take notes. Some students will record the lectures on their mobile phones. The entire campus provides several of such lecture halls. Throughout the day, group of students walk across the campus to different lecture halls and opened spaces depending on their personalised timetables. There are smaller lecture halls available for courses with fewer attendants, as well as open spaces and common areas for learners’ recreation and interaction.



Massive Classroom Learning 1



Photo # 1, #2 & #3: Students in a lecture hall, Amphitheatre 650, at the UB, Cameroon, a few minutes before the start of a level 200 course - Department of Agriculture – Wednesday, 21 January 2015. Tchoumbou-Ngantchop© (2015)

But then, also consider these three vignettes, captured within the same learning environment but at different times:

Scenario #II

It is 23:00 pm in Cameroon. The streets of a small town, where the main campus of one of the English-speaking state universities in Cameroon is situated, are dark and deserted. In a nearby students' hostel, night life has just begun. In one of the rooms, three students are gathered, fully alert. The room is narrow, with barely enough space for a small bed, a reading table and kitchen-corner for pans, pots, plates and a plastic bucket of water. Yet an extra sleeping mattress has been squeezed in between the left wall and the bed, making the lone reading table inaccessible.



Informal Learning 1

Photo # 4: Informal group learning in a student's room – Thursday, 19 February 2015 – 1:42am
Tchoumbou-Ngantchop© (2015)

Tonight, an extra mattress has been squeezed in. A third mattress has been shoved between the bathroom door and main entrance to the room. Two female students and a male peer are seated on one of the mattresses, respectively studying a piece of literature keenly. Around them, several sheets of papers are scattered about, notebooks, pens, pencils, personal electronic devices, bottled water, and half-opened packets of snacks. From every indication, they are willing to stay up late into the night. For now, they all appear busy; half concentrated, half chatty; flipping through their notebook pages and

sustaining a friendly conversation. Occasionally sounds of laughter and giggling fill room.

Scenario #III

Less than a mile away, this time on campus, another group of students comprising of three boys and a girl, make their way out of a dark classroom where they had been talking all evening. For about three hours they had sat in the dark, discussing past examination questions student read out loud, using a faint light distilled by the lighted screen of his mobile phone.



Informal Learning 2

Photo #5: Three students studying in the dark after power cut using flashlights from mobile phones – UB – Thursday 22, January 2015 at 21:17pm. **Tchoumbou-Ngantchop© (2015)**

Scenario #IV

About the same time, at another university, situated only few blocks away, about six students congregate around a whiteboard flip chart, attention all focused on a peer holding a marker and writing on the whiteboard as he explains. The discussion appears chatty and random; apparently disputative and uncoordinated. Occasionally, a voice dominates, proposing an explanation to the writings and illustrations on the board. But

then, there is a brisk interruption that drowns the leading voice. The focus of the discussion shifts from the board. A constructive conversation is in progress between two students and captures the attention of another...then a second interruption. This time it is a sharp interjection from another student...the result is an outburst of laughter.



Informal Learning 3

Photo #6: A group of engineering students trying to resolve a mathematical problem – CU Buea, Cameroon. Thursday 22, January 2015 at 23:11pm.

Tchoumbou-Ngantchop © (2015)

‘We have already spent one hour on this problem’ a concerned student remarks, ‘and we haven’t even looked at the second part of the problem.’ This lone voice appears to fade in the noisy discussion.

‘We must not rush for the sake of rushing. We need to understand’ what is it we are doing,’

- another student whispers in the French language.

A different speaker dominates the discussion confidently. She seems to be on a positive track regarding the solution of the problem, as her confident voice suggests. She manages to divert everyone else’s attention back to the chalk board. For a while, there is silence as fellow learners nod affirmatively at her mathematical demonstration.

Scenario #I describes the formal classroom setting in a massive university classroom. The last three describe other learning instances as they occur outside of the formal learning environment.

In the present study, I qualify them as ‘*formal*’ and ‘*informal*’ experiences of learning, respectively. They are both related as the same students oscillate between both spaces; during formal school hours, they learn according to the in settings provided by the university. Outside of normal school hours, they organise themselves in informal settings to carryout collaborative group talk among other personalised strategies of learning.

Croft (2003) and Akyeampong *et al.* (2006) observe in their research on classroom practices and assessment in developing contexts that learning and teaching processes are often more complex and ambiguous than they appear to be. This observation is particularly true with regards to higher education, which tends to take for granted both learners’ and teachers’ self-guided engagement and initiatives with the curriculum.

In fact, as much as there are several universities and adult centres of learning all over the world vying for academic excellence, higher achievement and global recognition, so too, there are numerous learning processes involved. Some of which are familiar, like a lecture standing in front of students in a reasonable size class to teach, and some are not, such as a classroom lesson involving close to one thousand students. This makes each learning environment unique, particularly in higher education, and perhaps resistant to generalized assumptions about teaching and learning. This research principally examines how some of these processes are contextually developed and sustained and how useful they are in attaining specific learning objectives. Investigating students’ learning practices is good point of departure, particularly such instances where students freely express themselves as learners, outside of formal learning environments.

1.2 Background of Study

Related to my research interest, the present study follows up on my previous research into learners' engagements in teacher training (Tchoumbou-Ngantchop, 2009), consolidates previous findings and puts them in the wider perspectives of higher education in Cameroon. My previous research explored student teachers' perception of assessment and how this perception influences their learning and teaching methods (Tchoumbou-Ngantchop, 2013). This was followed by another small-scale study including fewer participants, which was based on the academic and non-academic benefits of informal collaborative learning. As a follow-up study, this current in-depth research including a larger number of participants, further expound the insights from both previous works and explores feasible grounds of theorising on higher education with wider implications within and beyond Cameroon.

The key assumption here is that learning is fundamentally influenced by the context and activities in which it is embedded (Brown, *et al.*, 1989; Tabulawa, 1996; Alexander, 2005). Bruner's, (1998) psycho-cultural perspective in education highlights not only the place of the *social* in collaborative learning, but also the place of *culture* in cognitive development of the social learner. As such, applied to higher education, it can be assumed that university learners are constantly in the process of negotiating learning and positioning themselves in accordance with or against the learning culture in which they find themselves.

Both as a learner and a lecturer in cross-cultural higher education, my research interest includes validating, prominent learning practices among learners in Cameroon universities using viable empirical methods. As such, I hope to redeem practices which are often undermined by other constructs and methodologies. In this work, basic learning initiatives that appear ordinary at first sight will be qualitatively examined, with the aim of bringing to light previously unreported insights on how students engage in learning, in ways that reflect their situated-ness in the context of Cameroon.

1.2.1 Research Aims

This research aims at exploring group talk as a viable approach which learners in Cameroon universities, and comparable contexts, utilise to engage in learning,

Sub objectives include:

- a. To explore why learners in Cameroon universities find it necessary to engage in informal collaborative learning;
- b. To investigate the specific socio-cultural features involved in learners' interactions during informal collaborative learning initiatives;
- c. To examine how informal collaborative learning contributes to learning achievements in Cameroon universities and beyond.

1.3 Rationale

My interest in this research topic stems from a conflation of my dual identity as an assistant lecturer at a higher institution of learning in Cameroon, on the one hand, and as a doctoral student in Education, on the other hand. Both identities recursively interact and require shifting roles between and within different learning communities. For, as previous research affirms, my understanding and praxis as a researcher are shaped by and linked to my most valuable learning and teaching experiences as well as by the knowledge that acquired in the process (Dunne *et al.*, 2005; Usher, 1996). From this perspective, it is imperative and a positive challenge to systematically engage in this research and aim to generate evidence that will potentially improve my lecturer activities. The results of this work contribute new insights to existing research in the area of higher education teaching and context based learning.

In addition, this research aims at drawing attention to learners' perspectives in higher education pedagogy, which are often overshadowed by institutionalised discourses and assumptions about learners and their university experiences. As a learner at institutions of higher education across different cultures, my interest in learners' perspectives stems from personal experiences. These range from challenges, frustrations, even failures to successes and live transforming situations that I encountered as a Cameroonian gradu-

ate student in foreign universities, shaping my perceptions about learning in across multiple cultural spaces in North American, in European, in Oriental Institutions as well as in African universities

As a researcher, I am aware that because of my previous experiences, I am likely to position myself in ways that either contest, challenge or validate expectations and perceptions that my personal learning exposed me to. Thus, drawn to students' perspectives and reactions towards standard university practices and pedagogies, it seems to me that some of the academic, social and cultural choices that learners make outside of the structured learning environment of the classroom necessarily impact both their learning and their sense of self. Informal collaborative learning, though neglected in research, seems to embody learners' critical engagements with university learning, as well as attitudes, choices and dispositions which, to a large but underrepresented extent, might be decisive in shaping learners' experiences and identities throughout their university experience.

Against the background of my experience of learning both in Cameroon universities and in different graduate institutions overseas, exploring informal collaborative is essentially a reflexive process. Sensitive to critical issues in comparative pedagogies, it is a process that prompts me to systematically re-examine basic assumptions on how students engage in learning within their socio-cultural contexts. In this thesis, I aim to empirically validate my learning and teaching experiences across different cultures. By reflecting on my cross-cultural learning experience, I wish to contribute insights on the significance of learners' meaningful experiences, which have hitherto remained under-explored in pedagogy. As such, I wish to contribute towards improving teaching and learning processes in specific cultural contexts of higher education learning.

From a learners' perspective, this research aims to contribute to today's discourse in higher education, particularly on how to overcome the lack of leverage on the part of African universities which have continued to fuel perception of African University learners as academically inferior' to their peers in other western universities.

Finally, the historic context of this study makes it a viable resource for policy makers in Cameroon today, and perhaps in other developing contexts committed to meaningful

reforms in higher education. Against the backdrop and some of backlashes of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that have, among other consequences, prompted reform agendas in higher education in many developing countries like Cameroon, it is important to match on-going structural and organisation reforms with contextually suited and viable pedagogic reforms that are self-sustaining, and capable of withstanding the test of time in a globalising world. Investigating and validating already existing socio-cultural practices in learning will compliment similar efforts of research on the subject.

The Cameroon policy makers locate pedagogic reforms in its universities within a wider agenda to '*radically transform the image of higher education in Cameroon*'. This involves its professionalization, understood as making higher education relevant to the in the development agenda and project of an emerging Cameroon by 2035. This has in view the modernisation of traditional structures of higher education learning, the improvement of research innovation component and governance of higher education e (see. MINESUP-Cameroon, 2008). Within this framework, appropriate empirical research is needed to monitor, orient and integrate meaningful reforms at every level of the university education. Hence, investigating students' learning processes, especially in their most spontaneous spaces and environments of learning, hold the promise of informing the on-going discourse and subsequent policy documents, with learners' perspectives stemming from their day to day engagement in university studies.

1.4 Research Question

This exploratory research is hinged on the following research questions:

- a) Why do students in Cameroon universities engage in informal collaborative learning?
- b) What is the pedagogic value of student talk in an informal learning environment?
- c) How does informal collaborative learning in Cameroon universities help students achieve objectives that they consider specific to their learning?
- d) What are the socio-cultural features of informal collaborative learning in Cameroon universities?

These research questions consider the strategies and processes that learners put in place both individually and collectively to attain the objectives they themselves consider specific to their learning. Focusing on ‘informal group talk;’ or simply ‘group talk’ among learners is an approach to privilege learners’ perspectives on the contents and objectives of learning, which are often slighted in discourse on learning processes that occur within the formal classroom setting. This approach assumes that within the context of collaborative learning, learners take ownership of their learning and are more in touch with the direct impact of such learning both in their institutional culture and in their future engagements with the wider society (Herriot *et al.*, 2002; Ashton *et al.*, 1991; Bax, 2002).

Qualitative data included in this research is based on transcriptions of recordings of informal collaborative learning activities, semi-structured focus group interviews and semi-structured observational field notes. Owing to the centrality of group talk and dialogue in this study, Bakhtin’s theory of *dialogism* (Bakhtin, 1982) provides an apt framework to study concepts of collaborative learning initiatives. Drawing from tools of discourse analysis as a method of exploring texts, analysis in the present study seeks to go beyond the linguistic reading of ‘*what*’ learners take out of learning to focus on ‘*how*’ learners, through group talk, and strategically position themselves to construct understanding of disciplinary knowledge that is relevant to their academic communities and to the social and cultural contexts in which they are situated. This foregrounds further inquiries on how through group talk learners construct their distinctive sense of self around multiple identities during their learning.

Associating casual-informal interactions to meaningful learning objectives and outcomes is the main thrust of this research, but also its main challenge. As a case study, the research involves collecting and analysing purposive data from two main university institutions in English speaking Cameroon, and to a lesser extent, from one university in French speaking Cameroon. Through discourse analysis, data are presented in ways that best allows for participants’ voices to emerge; doubly as basis for an in-depth understanding of meanings that they ascribe to their lived experiences, and as basis for interpretations that, as a researcher, I bring to these learning experiences.

The findings of this study are hypothesis generating and can contribute both to existing underlining theories in education research as well as to the practical implementation of pedagogy tools for students, lecturers, researchers and other stakeholders in higher education. An added value is the fact that this work highlights learners' ability to meta-cognitively and strategically position themselves within and outside of the academic community in ways that are consonant with the socio-cultural environment in which they learn. Accordingly, the approach of this analysis is in line with concepts that intend to clear the ways for more innovative learning practices that make the university experience a '*community of practice*,' (Wenger, 1998). This, perhaps, seems a more reliable way to bridge current existing gaps between students' learning expectations and actual learning outcomes.

Theoretically, it opens the informal space of student learning as a significant space in higher education teaching and learning, situating it beyond the teacher-learner and structure-agency binaries that continue to dominate higher education practice and discourse. Being a case study, the scope of this research focuses only on particular 'instances in context,' which hinges on the much-neglected aspect of learners' interactions outside of formal learning spaces and on how such interaction enable or enhance learner's engagements within their learning experience.

Informal learning spaces are likely one of the most neglected of learning environments. Nevertheless, while investigating students' learning practices, it became clearer that these spaces in higher education, by their embodiment of cultural narratives in vogue, are perhaps potentially highly enabling learning environments in every learning context. The potentials for learners of the kinds of dialogues they engaged in, outside of the formal setting of the classroom, have been hardly systematically examined as part of higher education discourse

The theories generated from this research in a Cameroon higher education learning setting can add value to existing pedagogic concepts that integrate other off-beat, casual or informal interactions that are common place amongst learners in different cultural settings. This is exemplified in the previous imaginary but typical scenario of learners meeting with peers and discussing learning outside of formal learning environment.

1.5 Structure of this Thesis

The thesis is divided into seven chapters:

Chapter 1 sets the stage for the research questions by providing descriptive vignettes of the learning activity in question, i.e. informal collaborative learning. It further explores the purpose, rationale, research questions and introduces relevant contexts as well as an outline of the internal structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2, discusses the socio-historic, cultural, and international contexts of higher education in Cameroon, as the necessary narrative background that accounts for the specific learning processes observed.

Chapter 3 reviews key theories in the literature on ‘collaborative learning,’ particularly in relation to student talk and informal discussion. This chapter also provided a theoretical framework for the study.

Chapter 4 reports on the methodology of this research. It describes the study design, methods of data collection and analysis, as well as limitations of the methodology. Also discussed are issues of validity and reliability.

Chapters 5 and Chapter 6 present the finding from the data analysis and engage previous research to discuss findings in relation to the research questions and compare new insights. In Chapter 5, academic implications of informal collaborative learning are in focus, while in Chapter 6 its social and cultural features are examined.

Chapter 7 summarizes key findings and discusses the contribution of this research to the existing body of knowledge on teaching and learning praxis.

CHAPTER TWO

***“NOTHING’S LOST”*: CONTEXT OF STUDY**

2.1 Introduction

Informal learning experiences that students make in small groups, involve dynamics that can be characterised as fluid, transient and contextual. Collaborative learning initiatives, form part of a learning praxis, which itself is embedded in a wider learning context of the Cameroon setting. Learning as such cannot be dissociated from the ethnological and historic configuration of the country. This chapter analyses the multi-layered facets of informal collaborative learning in the Cameroonian university settings. It examines the history of Cameroon, existing policies on education, and critically assesses different institutional and historic elements that account for, motivate and sustain context oriented informal learning initiatives.

2.2 The Cameroon Context

The Republic of Cameroon (or simply Cameroon), is a country in Central Africa situated below the Gulf of Guinea, between the 2nd and the 13th degrees of the North latitude and 9th and 16th degrees of the East longitude. Cameroon has a surface area of 475 650 km² and has the shape of a triangle, stretching from north to south over about 1,200 km and from West to East over about 800 km. Her maritime border in the South West runs about 420 km along the Atlantic Ocean. In the West, Cameroon is bordered by Nigeria, in the South by Congo, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, in the East by Central African Republic, and in the North-East by Chad, where its triangular summit is capped by the Lake Chad (NIS-Cameroon, 2013)

Cameroon is endowed with a unique bio-diversity, and with geographic and climatic features that reflect most of the African continent. Located slightly above the equator, and bordered by the ocean, the southern part of Cameroon has dense vegetation that is part of the equatorial rain forest with hot humid climate and characteristic abundant precipitation. The western part constitutes a stretch of high lands with average altitudes over 1100 m and rich in volcanic soils. The northern region is known for its steppes and

Saharan vegetation, with a temperate climate, in some areas, and hot and dry with limited precipitation in others, particularly around the Lake Chad. Considering this variety, Cameroon is often referred to as ‘Africa in miniature,’ because large facets of everything that the rest of Africa has in terms of topography and climate, vegetation, flora and fauna can be found in Cameroon.

Politically, Cameroon, like most African countries, is a relatively young state. The years 2011-2012 marked the 50th anniversary of her colonial independence and re-unification, even though historically, Cameroon was never a classic ‘colonised’ territory. At the turn of the twentieth century, Cameroon was a German protectorate as of 14th July 1884, when the German flag was first hoisted on her soil. Prior to that, Cameroon was of little interest to Western explorers. In 1919, at the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was forced to give up her rights over Cameroon after losing World War I, and the territory came under British and French rule as mandate territory of the League of Nations. In 1948, The Cameroons became trustee territories of the United Nations Organisation (UNO). While France administered four-fifth of the territory, Britain administered one-fifth, as part of neighbouring Nigeria.

Following several local and international political developments in the 1950s, ‘The Cameroons,’ under French administration gained independence on January 1st 1960 and became ‘La Republique du Cameroun’. One year later, through a referendum, the southern part of the English trustee territory voted to become part of La Republique du Cameroun under a federated system of government, ending British rule. The northern part on the other hand opted to join the then independent Federal Republic of Nigeria. On the 20th of May 1972, the United Republic of Cameroon was born with a new presidential constitution, whereby both the English and the French Cameroons agreed to put an end to the two Federal States and become one system. English and French were retained as official languages under the new Republic of Cameroon. Since then, Cameroon has maintained its independence, has a strong presidential system, supported by a National Assembly and a judiciary. In recent years, the political system has been expanded to include a Senate and the territory is divided into ten administrative units known as regions. Figure 1 shows the socio-political map of Cameroon (2015). Two of these constitute the territory formally under British rule; that is, the Southwest and the

Northwest Regions. This research was carried out in two universities situated in the Southwest Region and in one located in the former French ruled Littoral Region.

The population of Cameroon currently stands at about 23.393 million with an annual growth rate of 1.7% (UNESCO, 2015). A rich diversity of ethnicity, languages and religions are a distinctive feature of the country. In terms of ethnicity, Cameroon, on the African continent, is considered the one spot where all ethnic groups converge (Fonlon, 1969; Neba, 1987; Kouega, 2007). This is probably due to its strategic geographic location that has witnessed massive migration across the continent in the 17th century. People of *Bantu* and *semi-Bantu* origins, predominantly living in the southern regions of Cameroon, have similar genetic traits with people as far the South of African Cape. The *Sudanese* and *Fulanie* ethnic groups that make up the northern regions of Cameroon have similar ancestral links to ethnic groups of West and North Africa including the *Shuwa Arabs*. In addition, *Pygmies* tribe of the equatorial jungle constitute a trans-border ethnic group in central Africa. These main ethnic groups are further subdivided into close to 280 different tribes that make up the ethnological map of Cameroon today. This ethnic diversity makes Cameroon an epicentre of the ‘African Confusion of Tongues’ (Fonlon, 1967; p.28), with over 250 spoken languages (Kouega, 2007: p.3). These varieties of languages are widely used within households, clans or even across towns by people of the same ethnic group (sometimes only a few thousand in number) (Appendix 2.1). These languages are usually not taught in schools or used within the formal school setting. Exceptions are however seen in some primary schools in remote areas, where a mixture of the local dialect and English or French is used to teach school beginners who can only communicate in their dialect.

Unlike ethnic languages that remain largely regional, religion is a trans-cultural subject that seems to both unify and divide Cameroonians along ethnic and geographic boundaries. Religion, as an expression of socio-cultural diversity in Cameroon, stimulates intercultural and inter-linguistic interaction among inhabitants. About 40% of the population practises one African traditional religion or another; 40% is Christian, and 20% is Muslim (Cameroon, 2013). In some areas, ethnic languages are used as unifying factors that ease trans-ethnic understanding and facilitate communal religious practices.

This is particularly true for western religions of the country and for Christian and Muslim religions.

In terms of economic development, Cameroon is currently considered a ‘Low Medium Income’ developing country (UNESCO, 2015), with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$32.55 billion for a population of about 23 million and a gross national income (GNI) slightly above the average for Sub Sahara Africa standing at \$1.350 per capita. In recent years, as per local (+5.7% in 2014, +5.6% in 2013), (Cameroon, 2015), and international statistics (+4.6% in 2015, +5.0% in 2014, +5.6% in 2013) (World Bank, 2015), Cameroon is among African countries that has maintained steady economic growth, with an inflation rate standing at 1.9%. This growth comes as a relief from the economic recession that the country experienced shortly after independence and reunification.

In fact, from 1972-1985, Cameroon experienced relative economic growth, with no recourse to structural adjustment programmes of the World Bank and of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). But the economic situation of the country swiftly changed in the mid-80s due to an economic crisis so that by 1989, Cameroon had fully subscribed to a structural adjustment programme of international financial institutions. In 1994, because of its colonial links to the French franc, the country’s economic problems further escalated by the devaluation of its currency, the CFA franc. In 2006, upon completion of specific objectives set by credit institutions, Cameroon benefitted from the ‘debt’ relief programmes of the World Bank and of the IMF, with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as key indicators. Since then, government efforts to fight corruption and to stimulate economic growth through privatisation and decentralisation of policies have helped to redress the economy and boost foreign investment in the country. Hence, between 1996 and 2007, poverty headcount ratio at national poverty line had dropped from 53.3% to 39.9%. The Industrial Production Index stood at 114.3 as of 2014, with a low CO₂ emission rate of 0.3 metric ton per capita. About 64% of the population has access to the mobile telephone, while 5.7% has access to the internet. The country has an HIV prevalence rate of 4.5%.



Political Map of Cameroon 1

Figure 1: Socio-political map of Cameroon (*Cameroon Statistical Year Book 2013*: <http://www.statistics-cameroon.org/news.php?id=260> [accessed on 04 August 2015])

According to most recent statistics (NIS-Cameroon, 2016) reporting 2014 figures, the education system of Cameroon comprises of 8,130 primary schools, served by 108 teacher training colleges; 3,590 secondary schools 8 state universities and a growing number of privately owned universities enrolling a total of 142,604 students from across

the country. Cameroon's education system scores poorly on international educational goal achievement indicators. However, among Low Medium Income countries, it ranks high in education with a literacy rate over a period of 15 years of 71% and projected at 75% (Male 81% and Female 69%) by 2015 (UNESCO, 2015). Independent sources place gross school enrolment at 127.8 (female 110.9) and net enrolment at 99.6 (female 87). The Gender Parity Index is relatively high compared to other African countries (Lewin, 2007). As of 2006, about 16.8% of government spending was on education (UNESCO, 2006).

In all, the education system in Cameroon has a very strong inclination to the country's colonial heritage. The remnants of colonial administration still dictate the organizational structure of schools, the pedagogical goals, curricula agendas, and set criteria for performance.

2.3 Education Policy in Cameroon

In 2006, about 16.8% of government spending was on education (UNESCO, 2006), making up the major part total government expenditure and serving a growing percentage of the population estimated to 8.5 million by 2015 per UNESCO (2008), which government statistics reports as 11, 382, 175 in 2014 (NIS-Cameroon, 2016). In fact, the Cameroon government is actively involved in directing education at all levels within the country, if one takes into consideration the number of presidential and ministerial decrees, guidelines and directives issued regularly on education. However, a closer look reveals the ad hoc nature of most of these documents and shows that there is inadequate legislature on education in Cameroon (Tchombe, 1999; Shu, 2000: p.8; Tambo, 2003).

Although in the past efforts have been made by the government to address this void, there seems to be a lack of political will to make genuine reforms in the education sector. Educational system reforms in Cameroon are further hampered by what appears to be a servile relationship between Cameroon government initiatives in education and the demands or conditionality of international agenda on development and education, which tend to limit prospects for the implementation of a comprehensive plan or poli-

cies with relevance to the Cameroon context. Beginning in the 1970s-international development programmes continuously influenced educational reforms, often in ways that did not necessarily prioritize national development agendas (Tchombe, 1999).

In recent times, with the introduction the MDG and the EFA (Education for All) goals, credible education sector planning has become a prerequisite for the acquisition of international aid destined towards poverty reduction. Classified as a Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC), Cameroon's commitment to education in recent years has been strongly linked to the Poverty Reduction Strategic scheme of international funding agencies (Appendix 2.2). Since 2010, government initiatives and decrees have been geared towards expanding access to quality education defined in terms of high standards of curricula, teaching and assessment that aim to ensure skill learning, access to Information Technology and good governance.

2.4 Context of Informal Collaborative Learning in Cameroon Universities

The context of informal collaborative learning correlates with the structural-agentic factors that frame learning in Cameroon universities. This section identifies such structural and agency related factors, within the wider socio-cultural context of university learning in Cameroon. It also takes a closer look at factors that influence learner's identities.

2.4.1 Structural Context of Informal Collaborative Learning

Learners come together to study informally with aims. These aims are related to immediate and institutional practices that recursively influence learning processes within such groups. Institutional practices are framed by history, policies and practices within Cameroon higher education; and the latter are themselves influenced by international trends in higher education (Figure 2). Each of these levels of influence calls for closer examination.

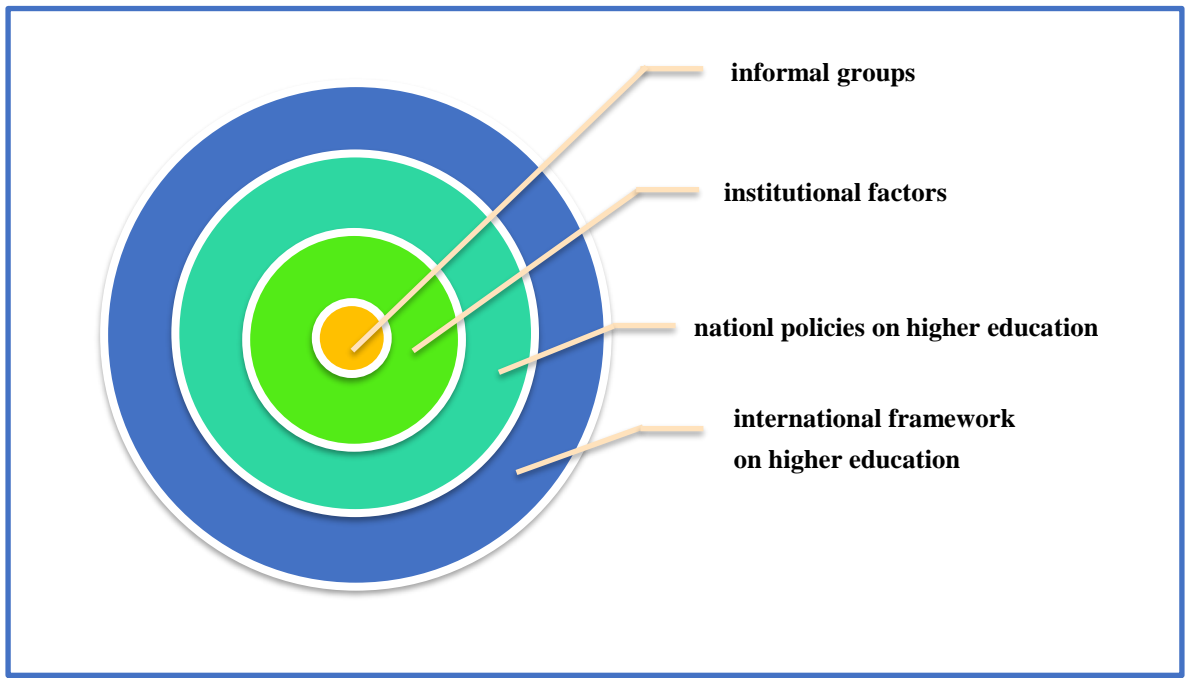


Figure 2: Structural context of informal group learning in Cameroon

2.4.2 Institutional Factors

Informal group learning activities occurs outside of the formal classroom settings, sometimes at unconventional locations both on and off campus. Nonetheless, they are influenced by institutionalized pedagogic frameworks. Albeit removed in space, time and from any formal category of student organized learning, like tutorials, they still reflect institutional practices. As such, the immediate context of group learning activities is influenced by the various assessment procedures, institutional practices and learning processes that are relevant to university learning in Cameroon. Two obvious factors deserve mentioning: massive classroom sizes and assessment policies / practices.

2.4.3 Massification of Higher Education in Cameroon

One of the striking features of university learning today in Cameroon, as is the case in other parts of Africa, is the massive classroom in which learning occurs. The concept of *Massification* has been used to describe current trends in higher education in developing countries (UNESCO, 2009). The National Bureau of Statistics reports average

student-teacher ratio at state universities in Cameroon at 1: 44 as of 2014 (NIS-Cameroon, 2016). Interpretation of this data is limited by the fact that it includes all enrolled students and the total number of teaching staff on register without any distinctions. The data does not specify how many staffs were actively engaged in teaching, without additional administrative responsibilities or how many were full-time lecturers and how many part-time lecturers. No distinction was also made between lecturers, teaching assistants and teacher trainees. More detailed statistics would have clearly illustrated the reality of one lecturer in front of several hundreds of students in an overcrowded amphitheater at a Cameroonian state university on a regular day (Photo #7).



Teaching in Massive classroom learning 2

Photo #7: Students in a lecture hall at a Cameroonian State university shortly before lectures begin Tchoumbou-Ngantchop© (2015)

Students in some universities are bound to come to certain lectures several hours ahead of time to secure sitting or standing space. Massification persists in Cameroon because the higher education sector alone receives more than 60, 000 applicants each year, for only 8 states universities of inadequate capacity, about a dozen higher professional training institutions with high hurdles to access, and another dozen of good privately run universities into which access is additionally limited by high tuition requirements.

Massive classrooms have far reaching implications for teaching and learning, particularly in universities that, in theory, seek to enhance competence in student-centered learning. Students participate almost anonymously in lectures, and there is little opportunity for student-teacher interaction. Lecturers, in such situations, by default, teach using traditional frontal lesson models where the teacher stands in front of a class and speaks while the students listen and make notes. Sometimes, due to limited class space, students organize themselves into smaller learning groups where they take turns to attend lectures and share notes. However, some universities are making efforts to improve on learner-teacher interaction e.g. involving teaching assistants to mediate more effective teaching and learning. To improve students' participation, in some universities where class size allows for continuous assessment procedures, lectures take classroom presence and active participation into account during summative assessment.

Private universities, even those reputed to have good academic programmes and good performance at national certification examinations, are also faced with the problem of massive classrooms to some extent. Good performance leads to increase in enrolment, which in turn allows for better investment in infrastructures and teaching staff, leading to better performance. This ultimately leads to further increase in enrolment, whereas, most of the time infrastructural development lags behind increases in enrolment.

How individual students relate to the phenomenon of crowded learning environments in Cameroon universities needs further research. However, learners in this setting have identified the need to carry out self-organized additional learning, to successfully achieve curricular learning objectives. By initiating informal learning groups outside of formal learning spaces, students automatically position themselves in ways best suited to respond to their individual and collective learning needs and with respect to their learning communities.

2.4.4 Institutional Teaching and Learning Practices

Internal teaching and learning procedures in universities also enable collaborative learning initiative as part of the curriculum. Students registered in particular courses are grouped into smaller units to facilitate interaction both with the teachers and their peers.

Sometimes the allocation of *Continuous Assessments* tasks considers the level of collaboration among learners in their respective groups. In this present study, this form of collaborative learning is considered part of form classroom activity because they are initiated not by the students themselves but by their learning institution.

2.4.5 National Policies on Higher Education in Cameroon

The latest guidelines of the Cameroonian Ministry of Higher Education (2014-2015) aim at '*a radical transformation*' of higher education for the socio-economic development of the country and identify four main areas in current practice that account for government spending on higher education:

- a) the development of the technological and professional components of higher education learning;
- b) the modernization and professionalization of university structures;
- c) the improvement of research and innovation to meet international professional standards, centered on the successful harmonization of university programmes and curricula around the License, Master, and Doctorate certifications system (LMD); and
- d) the improvement of higher education governance.

'Professionalisation' seems to refer to the relevance of higher education with regards to the economic needs of the country associated to the government agenda towards an 'emerging Cameroon by 2035' (MINESUP-Cameroon, 2015)

Meeting the developmental needs of the country has long been the goal of higher education in Cameroon. These goals have changed through the years, and so have government priorities in developing the higher education sector. In the wake of the country's independence from the joint French and British rule in 1960, the goals of tertiary education were tied to the vision of a newly independent nation that sought to develop trained human resources to manage its own affairs (Njeuma, 1999). It was in line with this perspective, that the Federal University of Cameroon was created in 1962. At the time, the main objective was to harmonize institutions, schools, learning centers and

quasi-faculties that previously served the objective of colonial authorities, to educate a carefully selected group of indigenes to become local administrative assistants.

The year 1972 saw a further expansion of the university system to include more technical and professional programmes aiming to meet national needs (Njeuma, 1999). It was not until 1993 that these regional centers were upgraded to three independent state universities. In 2001, the provision of higher education, which until then had remained a prerogative of the state, was opened to the private sector, leading to a wide expansion of the university system.

In recent years, state decrees and ordinances (2003-2015), prompted by backlashes of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agenda and by international trends, have led to the expansion of the state university system in Cameroon. Within this period, the number of university centers grew from 2 to 8 with 92 affiliated faculties, schools and institutions. Generally, access to state and privately run universities is open to all upon successful validation of the national advance level examinations (*G.C.E A Level*) due after 7 years of primary and in total 7 years of secondary (5 years) and high school (2 years) education. The state nonetheless, retains the prerogative to organizing competitive entrance examinations into state and private universities as well as to professional training academies and institutions, including those that guarantee subsequent employment in the civil service.

Currently, over more than a score of private universities, institutes and professional training centers exist in Cameroon and are open to some 50 000 to 60 000 students who seek access to higher education each year in Cameroon (MINESUP-Cameroon, 2015). Unlike state run institutions, which for the most part demand an affordable tuition fee of 50 000 CFA francs a year (the equivalence of about \$110: September, 2016), private universities operate on a user-cost scheme making them unaffordable for the average Cameroonian and accessible only to a small elite. For both state and private universities, the cost of living and health care is generally at the expense of students themselves. Therefore, due to issues of affordability, a clear majority of learners rely on the state for higher education, making the expansion of infrastructures and the continuous recruitment of young professionals as teachers, imperative. Consequently, massive and

overcrowded amphitheaters that remain a cause for concern about the quality of education continue to characterize state owned universities in Cameroon.

Overall, higher education in Cameroon has seen much development and expansion in recent years. However, analysis of policies and practice shows the need to overcome a few issues that continue to undermine improvement. Firstly, there is a persistent lack of political will to overcome the centralized, colonial rooted system of higher education management. Within this system, heads of trustee boards, university chancellors, executive vice chancellors, and the administrative heads of various university departments are government appointed officials. Students' union representation in university policy making, organization and day running is limited, and often frowned upon by administrative and political authorities. In recent years, some universities have experienced major violent suppressions of student's union activities or protests, leading to imprisonments and even deaths of participants. Also, the influence of governmental decisions extends right down to a ministerial ordered list of students who gain admissions into strategic faculties that promise better job prospects within the Cameroon context upon graduation. To date, higher education management in Cameroon remains reactionary and often linked to obscure political and social agendas rather than on foresighted policy.

Even as the creation of more private universities continues to bring relative relief from the state monopoly on higher education provision, statutory documents and decrees still require private providers and stakeholder of higher education in Cameroon to stick to strict specified terms regarding curricula for teaching, learning and assessment. Government prescribed mentorship programmes for private universities regarding curriculum and issues of certification have led to controversies regarding the status of private universities in Cameroon. This undoubtedly has taken the wind out of the sails of avant-gardist reforms in Cameroonian higher. Slow progression in constructive reforms remains a characteristic feature of Cameroon's higher education (Njeuma, 1999).

In addition, there is an 'all-pervasive' examination motif that seem to frame and dominate higher teaching and learning processes in Cameroon schools, dating back to colonial times (Njoh, 2000; Tambo, 2003), and which, often, narrows down higher educa-

tion objectives as laid down in assessment guidelines of administrative documents. Finally, reforms seem to have consistently overlooked important relevant cultural and social considerations that are unique to the context within which learning occurs in Cameroon (Tambo, 2003).

There is evidently a lack of data on the impact of the numerous structural and administrative reforms in higher education in Cameroon in recent years and how these affect teaching and learning processes. Also, little is known as to how learners position themselves in relation to such reforms and government policies. It can however, be assumed that informal spaces of learning provide Cameroon students the opportunity to (re)act in ways best suited to achieve better outcomes for what they perceive to be meaningful learning objectives within the higher education system.

2.4.6 The International Context of University Learning in Cameroon

University learning in other parts of the world operate within the currents wider, inevitable, contemporary, economic, technological, and scientific trends that all fall under *globalisation* (Altbach, 2006; UNESCO, 2009). What is at stake for national government, policy makers and institutions is upholding the relevance and competitiveness of higher education provision within their specific context, vis-à-vis meeting the learner's requirements to navigate in a globalizing world.

Consequently, in Cameroon as elsewhere, the discourse around curricula for teaching and learning is centred on strategies that align with and match the inevitable demands of globalisation. Cameroon universities as such, are expected to prepare graduates who are fit to meet the demands of the Cameroonian labour market as well as international markets. To better address this challenge, the government of Cameroon in 2005, alongside other French-speaking countries in central Africa, aligned herself with the Central European agenda on higher education, endorsed by 29 countries in a declaration at Bologna in 1999. For Cameroon, this means bringing her higher education academic programmes and certification up to internationally recognised standards and focusing on aspects of professionalization, research and certification based on the Licence-Master-Doctoral (LMD) framework.

The 2001 privatization laws in Cameroon saw the creation of several private universities and the commercialization of higher education, whereby learners are offered specialized skills in scientific disciplines, in restricted, closed environments in exchange for very high tuition fees. This comes along with the promise of better opportunities in an increasingly competitive job market. Today, there are over 60 professional institutes of higher education in Cameroon that offer specialised training in different fields (MINESUP-CAMEROON, 2013)

A key assumption in the globalisation of education agendas in higher education is that learners will be able to develop high level competences that are transferable from one part of the world to another. While African universities continue to lag behind on international ranking scales, learners are not however, without personalized aspirations that enable them to engage learning in ways that allow for development of personal competences and skills relevant for their individual aspirations. Informal collaborative learning groups seem to provide a safe space where learners can position themselves strategically to attain their perceived learning goals.

2.4.7 Conclusion

The complex relationship between learning in formal spaces and learning outside of formal spaces has been largely theorised on by critical pedagogues and postcolonial theorists. The undergirding premise is that western education, by its very nature, centralizes learning around a hegemonic colonial understanding of education (Freire, 1970, 1976; Gramsci, 1971; Giroux, 1983; Hall, 1996; Tikly, 1999). By this very fact, it naturally creates fragmentations and stratifications in contexts, whereby while some learning communities become enmeshed; others are increasingly marginalised (See Held *et al.*, 1999 cited by Tikly, 2001, p.152). Darlington and Scott's (2002) construct of '*marginal-core*' provides a useful framework in positioning informal collaborative learning groups in relation to its surrounding contexts. Informal collaborative learning groups are developed in the marginal spaces of structures of learning, harbouring on-going social processes within which learners position themselves in response to institutional requirements. At a macro level, academic discourses today use term *glocalisation* to

associate marginal or local space with ‘a positive learning experience’ and to encourages the enhancement of learners’ *glocal* [emphasis in text] experience through a critical academic and cultural exchange of global and local socio-economic and political issues’ (Patel & Lynch 2013: p.223).

Ashwin theorises the relationship between the institutional structures which produces learning discourses and regulate learning, and their corresponding agentic human factors through which learning interactions are possible. Limitation in existing research on structure and agency are to the extent that they tend to highlight one aspect of this dynamics over the other (Ashwin, 1998); there is a one-sided tendency in literature to assume that meaningful change in education can be effected by directly influencing structural factors such as curricula, institutional and socio-political components of learning (2008). At the same time, there is also a counter tendency to focus on learners and teachers, as if objective structures did not have the power to control both the lives and very perceptions of these stakeholders. Whereas, both tendencies should be simultaneously considered as ‘*structure-agency*’ (ibid, p.152), expressing a single dynamic, in which learning structures condition learners’ intentions, practices, and lives, and inversely, learners’ perceptions and actions provide the basis for institutional and structural reforms. Similarly, in seeking alternate views to teacher-focused and learner-focused aspects in education, Ashwin posits a ‘learning-teaching’ paradigm, that closely captures the dynamics of social process within which higher education learning occurs (2009). Thus, it is possible to envision informal collaborative learning interactions as being ‘teaching-learning’ experiences. The premise here, is that learners are far from being passive observers in the construct understanding of knowledge in learning. They are both at the producing and receiving end of knowledge. Applied to informal collaborative groups, learning comes about both because of the process and of engaging in a socio-historical and cultural context of learning.

CHAPTER THREE

“OR ELSE: ALL IS TRANSLATION”: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

3.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the body of education literature in relation to informal collaborative learning. It brings to light the fact that students’ informal learning experiences, though an important part of their experience as learners, has so far received little or no attention in higher education research. This is likely a result of the fact that learners’ experiences are often closely linked to institutional practices. As such, independent learners’ experiences that are not directly under the control of institutional stakeholders are simply overlooked. This chapter seeks to conceptualise informal learning experiences, as much as possible, within the limits of conventional frames of references provided in teaching and learning literature, particularly with regards to higher education.

The first section of the review highlights the link between assessment practices in Cameroon schools and collaborative learning initiatives by students. Then, after a critical assessment of the literature on ‘collaborative learning’ as an initial construct to understanding learners’ experiences, this chapter further identifies and critiques epistemological underpinnings of collaboration in learning theories. By so doing, the review foregrounds an understanding of the ‘*informal*’ as part of the collaborative learning experience. The outcome of this review will be used to construct an analytical framework; a useful tool for analysing data on students’ talks within ‘informal’ learning circles.

3.2 Conceptualising ‘*Informal*’ Learning Experiences

3.2.1 Assessment and Students’ Learning Practices

Informal students learning groups are directly and tangibly linked to institutional practices through assessment. Students come together to learn with the ultimate objective of achieving specific assessments objectives and learning outcomes in Cameroon universities. This is because learning, in general, involves more than just the transmission of information from teacher to student; it includes different aspects of interaction between these parties and other parameters involved like objectives of the curriculum and

the assessment strategies (Watkins, 2000). Beyond the classroom, learning is a process whereby people relate to their environment, culture and society (Bigge & Shermis, 2004). It can be inferred from these two basic assumptions about learning that pedagogies are social and cultural constructs based on ideas about effective learning (Tabulawa, 1997; Cochran-Smith, 2000). Every learner holds a view of how he or she perceives effective learning. These views result from previous individual experiences of informal and formal education. This means that students in Cameroon universities carry out learning practices, attitudes and habits that have been historically, socially and culturally constructed to reflect learning outcomes that are relevant within the Cameroonian context.

Context based approaches to learning (Lubisi & Pryor, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Eraut, 1994; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Akyeampong *et al.*, 2006) have developed under the premise that learning in itself is an ‘intense and complex activity’ (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2006: 159; Danielson, 1996; Harris, 1998; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 1999) often requiring different agents, and aiming at particular results within specific contexts. So, to better understand student learning processes, care should be taken to discern the constraints and demands that account for and continue to sustain such processes, as well as the models of learning underlining them. For, generally, learners develop strategies, depending on constraints and demands of their immediate learning context and gradually refine them to suit the on-going culture of learning (Hargreaves, 1992).

In the case of Cameroon, summative examinations, according to Tambo’s (2003: p.120) figurative irony, from colonial days, has been *the tail wagging the dog* in every aspect of learning. And assessment, as part of learning, is contextually and culturally conditioned by distinctive values that are reflected in other aspects of life (Alexander, 2000; Stuart *et al.*, 2009). Historically, the overall policy in assessing learning in Cameroon appears to be over reliant on a colonial system of education which privileged ‘achievement tests’ within their institutions in the form of an aptitude test that guaranteed better job opportunities or a promotion to a higher institute of learning overseas (Ngoh, 2000; Ndongko & Nyamnyoh, 2000). To this day, teaching and learning in Cameroon schools continues to be largely examination oriented; examinations determine what the schools teach, and determine how students organise themselves in response.

The exact nature of the relationship between assessment and learning outcomes in literature is yet to be established. However, a few approaches have been used to explain its complexity. An approach highlights the pedagogic influence of assessment, seeing assessment as a formative tool. It distinguishes three ways by which assessment influences learning: (a) through its intrinsic or objective qualities (b) through teachers' interpretation of the assessment material and process, and (c) through student's interpretation of the task at hand and the context of the assessment (Boud, 1995: p.36; Gulikers *et al.*, 2008: p.402). This distinction suggests that at least theoretically, the objectives of learning and perceptions of assessment work together in pedagogy to generate specific learning outcomes. Students' perceptions and response to assessment demands have attracted a considerable amount of research (Entwistle, 1991; Scouller & Prosser, 1994; Scouller, 1997; Gijbels, 2005; Struyven *et al.*, 2005; Akyeampong *et al.*, 2006; Segers *et al.*, 2008; Onderi *et al.*, 2009). It can be assumed then that students in Cameroon universities come together in small groups to study outside of their formal learning environment, as result of their learning expectations. Also, that these expectations are remotely constructed by the historic and cultural environments in which they learn, as well as by their perceptions of assessment practices and expectations.

In the following section, informal collaborative learning is examined as a viable learning strategy through which students in Cameroon universities, perceive, negotiate and accomplish assessment demands with respect to their learning outcomes.

3.2.2 Preliminary Concept: 'Collaborative Learning'

According to Roschelle and Teasley, 'collaboration' is said to be 'a coordinated, synchronous activity that is the result of continued attempts to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem' (1995: p.70). In broad terms, therefore, 'collaborative learning' in education literature describes situations whereby people or students come together to learn or at least attempt to learn something collectively (Dillenbourg, 1999). It assumes that knowledge can be created within a population where members actively interact by sharing experiences and taking on different roles (Mitnik *et al.*, 2009). Collaborative learning then can be considered an 'umbrella term' or a philosophy of learn-

ing, because it pulls together a variety of educational approaches, involving both methodologies and environments in which learners engage in a common task, and at the same time are dependent on and accountable to each other.

Used almost interchangeably with the concept of ‘*collaborative learning*’ in literature is the theory of ‘*cooperative learning*’, which can best be defined as small heterogeneously mixed working groups of learners, learning collaborative/social skills while working towards a common academic goal or advantage (Dallmann-Jones, 1994). Irrespective of attempts that have been made in literature to distinguish between these two concepts, their specific and distinctive uses evade clarity when it comes to the actual practice (Panitz, 1997; Sharan 2010; Hovhannisyan & Sahlberg, 2010; Howe & Mercer, 2012). As such, in line with Panitz’s theory (Panitz, 1997), all pedagogies of cooperative learning involve the same basic principles as collaborative learning. In practical terms, both notions seem to overlap, referring to the same reality, that is, students coming together to learn. In tertiary education, collaborative learning, describes the same practices that at the elementary and secondary level would be called *cooperative learning*, including group activities, open dialogue, peer-talk.

The expression ‘*collaborative learning*’ is usually used in literature regarding interaction among learners in a classroom setting. This seems to explain why, informal collaborative learning practices, or learning activities which extend beyond the sphere of institutionally accountable learning spaces, have so far been overlooked in literature. As used in this research, ‘*collaborative learning*’ refers to activities and learning processes that allow students to organize themselves into small work groups for achieving personal and collective learning goals.

In higher education, unlike at lower levels of learning, collaborative learning implies a greater exercise of freedom and responsibility on the part of learners (Panitz, 1997). It can also be described as part of learners’ engagement with learning activities that are congruent with learning expectations within the formal setting of university learning (Dillenbourg *et al.*, 1995).

Mainly because ‘collaborative learning’ as a concept applies to different interactive learning processes, it does not adequately translate the complex processes involved when learners come together to study outside of the formal learning environment of the classroom. A closer examination of the use of this concept in literature should elucidate its possibilities as well as its limits in exploring collaborative initiatives within unconventional spaces, that is, outside of standard school practices and outside of the formal space of learning.

3.2.3 Pedagogic Underpinnings of Collaborative Learning

In principle, when students come together to learn, they do so through group talk, that is, learning is achieved via the use of language and speech. Hence, collaborative learning activities have often been understood from *linguistic* and *cognitive* stand points, both of which harbour a foundational assumption that there exists an inseparable relationship between talk - understood as the formal aspects of language - and cognition. Different hypotheses have been proposed for the relationship between *language* and learners’ *cognitive development* by scholars (Piaget, 1958; De Saussure, 2012 [1916]; and Chomsky, 2000). These theories and other previous studies in education sciences explain the relationship between words used in the context of learning and the cognitive development of learners involved. Nonetheless, the intricate interplay between *language* and *thought* which can persuasively account for every step of the complex learning processes involved in group talk largely, however, remains unexplored in research. The lasting challenge in literature has been that of painting a full picture of cognitive development as related to linguistic methodologies.

Piaget’s developmental psychology (Piaget, 1958) focuses on the development of cognition in children. He depicts an autonomous child operating in a world of things and action, rather than in a world of people and relationships (Snow, 1990). In his groundbreaking contribution to educational psychology, Piaget, however, overlooks the interactive use of language in impressing and framing the thought patterns of a child. The Piagetian framework advocates that the child’s actions are of more pedagogical value

than his words. Alternately, other research in collaborative learning has relied on approaches that give more weight to the social-interactive dimensions of learning as expressed in speech and language. Social constructivist frameworks provide a counterbalance to the Piagetian view, by situating the child within its socially stimulated context, and hence identify language as central to learning. This explains why the broad theoretical framework in analysing collaborative learning comes from Vygotsky (1978) whose theory of learning ‘socializes’ children’s learning experiences beyond ‘motorised’ interactions (Doise & Mugny, 1981; Bruner, 1998; Dunne, 2005).

According to Vygotsky’s theory of learning, there exists an inherent social and linguistic nature of learning that can be expressed and experienced through ‘*constructive*’ dialogues amongst learners. In addition, group diversity, in terms of knowledge and experience, contributes positively to learning processes. He begins with the same premise as Piaget, that learning and cognitive development are interrelated in the life of a child from the first day of its existence and continues throughout life (Vygotsky, 1978: p.84). He explains the relationship between learning and development by illustrating the interplay between two interconnected levels of development in a child. The first level is referred to as the *actual developmental* level; or, the level of development of a child’s mental functions established because of cognitive dispositions already completed in the child’s developmental cycles. The second level is that of *potential* or *proximal development* (See. Vygotsky, 1978: p.85). Vygotsky defines the ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ (ZPD) as:

the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978: p.86).

In a child’s learning process, the "actual developmental level characterizes mental development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterizes mental development prospectively" (Vygotsky, 1978: p.86-87). Unlike Piaget who sees the child as an independent explorer, Vygotsky’s theory underscores the role of the ‘*other*’, the ‘*adult*’ or the ‘*more capable peer*’. This implies that a child with some assistance -

of a more capable interlocutor - will acquire the tools it needs to develop from one level to a more complex level of mental activity.

Building on Vygotsky, subsequent constructivists (Bruner, 1998) develop the process known as '*scaffolding*,' an architectural imagery, referring to the way the adult guides the child's learning via focused questions and positive interactions. Learning consists in providing learners with the required '*support points*' for performing a higher-level action (Obukhova & Korepanova, 2009). This is the theoretical basis of collaborative learning which 'has as its main feature a structure that allows for student talk: students are supposed to talk with each other...and it is in this talking that much of the learning occurs' (Golub, 1988: p.7). This is true in as much as learners become part of a cognitive scaffolding structure directed either by a teacher or by a more enlightened peer (Vygotsky, 1978).

In analysing talk, the Vygotskian narrative recognises and privileges of language as the cognitive medium of social interaction (Junefelt, 1990). As Halliday argues,

When children learn language, they are not simply engaging in one type of learning among many; rather they are learning the foundations of learning itself' (Halliday, 1993: p.5).

Language and thought are intimately related. Through language, learners do not just acquire knowledge, they generate knowledge. They also engage in an overlapping interplay of their respective identities. The cognitive development of the child depends to a considerable degree on the forms and the contexts of language which they have encountered and used (see. Alexander 2008: p.10).

Language-based theories have also been used as frameworks of analysis for other interactive learning initiatives. Psycholinguists postulate that the formal grammar of a language can explain the ability of a hearer-speaker to produce and interpret an infinite number of utterances, including novel ones, with a limited set of grammatical rules and a finite set of terms. Language is a number of general processing mechanisms in the brain, that interact with the extensive and complex social environment in which language is used and learned (Chomsky, 2000). On this basis, analysing interactive learning experiences entails examining, in detail, the relationship between linguistic forms

found in learners' sentences, as well as the 'scaffolding processes' involved, and the thought patterns that they generate (Bowerman, 1980).

In collaborative learning research, this will mean investigating language and talk as cognitive vehicles by which thought patterns are transformed into learning opportunities. To analyse collaborative learning in Cameroon universities using this framework, structural linguistics principles must be applied to the discourse on group talk. This would entail capturing and analysing group talk from a psycho-linguistic viewpoint, highlighting how different functions of grammar cohere to reveal and to validate valuable knowledge in construction amongst learners. The underlying assumption here is that both the researcher and learners need to have a common understanding of the English and French languages as vehicles of interaction, which is virtually impossible because the language of group talk is never homogenous. Such interactions are not restricted to a particular language of learning (English or French). Learners in informal spaces in Cameroon tend to oscillate between the different linguistic variations and combinations possible (Cameron Pidgin, Cam-Franglais etc.), usually such that their engagement translates to a colloquial rather than a standard use of language.

Hence, although language provides a gateway into the socialising process of learning, it seems rather simplistic to reduce complex processes of learning to a set of linguistic constructs or 'utterances' (Chomsky, 1957). Meaningful thought patterns and actions cannot be '*scaffolded*' based on formal linguistic principles (Vygotsky, 1978). Even from a purely linguistic point of view, Bates (1996) and Tomasello (2003) argue very strongly against Chomsky's theorisation of language as a general processing mechanism whereby the brain interacts with the social environment.

Nevertheless, much of the critique of language as a tool of learning comes from political and cultural theorists. In showing the limits of speech as a credible vehicle of thought construction, for example, critical ethnography tends to view some generalising theories of grammar as "*linguistic imperialism*" (Mühlhäusler, 1996), with deeply rooted Eurocentric and Anglo-centric leanings (Van Valin, 2000; Evans & Levinson, 2009) that cannot be used in a generalized manner. For learners in Cameroon universities, the

use of language holds strong social and political underpinnings that go beyond the content knowledge discussed in informal learning environments. This shows the limitation of structural linguistic theories as a dominant theoretical paradigm in analysing student talk or collaborative learning experiences.

But nothing's lost. For, there is more to student talk than grammatical functions. In fact, analysing talk beyond grammar has the epistemic potential of opening varied ways of understanding the value of language and its relationship to learning, particularly in more casual learning environments.

3.2.4 Beyond Rules of Language and Grammar

Challenging the rigid use of language in analysing social interactions, Halliday (1993), from a theoretical standpoint, takes into consideration the contextual nature of language. In his view, language is far from being self-contained. Rather it is entirely dependent on the society in which it is used, with an intrinsic relationship to culture. Challenging structural linguistics, Halliday focuses on the transient use of language to establish that 'to use language is...just as to use a knife to cut' (Halliday, 1974: p.145), making it possible to approach language as a semiotic system; 'not in the sense of a system of signs,' but in terms of its functional aspect or what he calls 'a systemic resource for meaning' (Halliday, 1985: p.108). He distinguishes between idealised systems of grammatical forms and 'language in use.' With the help of this distinction, language takes a functional character, and must be understood as such, particularly in analysing utterances. By implication, a more comprehensive use of language requires that when context comes into play, the structure of grammar alone falls short of being a reliable thrust of analysis; activity and cultural elements of talk must also be taken into consideration.

Echoing Halliday but from an empirical perspective, (Barnes, 1976, 1992; 2012) and (Mercer & Dawes, 2012: p.1), draw attention to the functional use of language within a classroom. Through observation of classroom talks they distinguish between '*exploratory talk*' and '*presentational talk*'. While '*presentational talk*' represents a formal,

calculated and structured form of student talk, '*exploratory talk*' can be described as 'hesitant and incomplete' because it enables the speaker to try out ideas and information, to hear how they sound, get feedback, and rearrange them into different patterns (2012: p.5; Sutherland, 2013). Barnes goes further to affirm that the latter seems to be more fruitful talk, as it is typical of the early stages of approaching new ideas. In a similar distinction, Mercer and Dawes suggest that the '*thinking together*' approach to collaborative classroom initiatives allows for an exploratory, yet constructive use of language within the classroom, such that learners can collectively 'build-up' emerging ideas in the process of talking (2012: p.55). Cazden, on her part, describes an approach called '*fostering a community of learners*' whereby learners (young adult learners especially), tap into their social abilities to enhance control and a sense of agency over their education. It also enables their critical reflection on the process of learning (Cazden, 2012: p.151).

In a more radical sense, Mercer (1995) focuses not so much on the use of language itself but on the scruffiness of students' learning experiences where language by itself is no longer predictable in its expression of knowledge: 'language,' he writes

[...] does not just carry or represent the knowledge of our culture; the way we talk and write are themselves part of that cultural knowledge. In this sense the image of language as a 'tool' is misleading, because tools are normally ready-made, given objects that are picked up and used to do a job and are unchanged in the process. Language is not like that. By using language to learn, we may change the language we use. This is why an analysis of the process of teaching and learning, of constructing knowledge, must be an analysis of language in use (Mercer, 1995: p.6).

Mercer's claim is in line with those of other sociocultural theorists in education who have often highlighted the context in which language is used as critical in learning interactions (Brown, *et al.*, 1989; Bruner, 1998; Tabulawa, 1996; and Alexander, 2005). The assumption is that group talk is 'situated' in place and time. Hence, linguistic utterances reflect a more dynamic interplay of *thought* and *context*. Learning here is perceived as a socio-cultural experience in which language engages and transmits not just thought patterns and concepts but also meaningful cultural experiences. Learning as a 'community practice' has been used to illustrate how learning is understood as part of

a wider social theory that involves ‘the social practices,’ ‘identities,’ and ‘social structures,’ as well as the ‘situated experiences’ of learners (Brown & Duguid, 1989; Wenger, 1999). Thus, learning is not a separate activity restricted to the classroom; it is a community practice, our everyday “participation in our communities and organizations” (Wenger, 1999: p.8). We learn to talk and talk to learn (Alexander, 2005).

This view of language, at least theoretically, has far reaching implications in researching students’ learning experiences outside of the classroom, within informal spheres of learning. It makes possible the analysis of learning processes that cannot be captured by the rigid structure of grammar. As such, it invites research into learning spaces that otherwise would ‘*be lost in translation*,’ that is, those out of the scope of research, since these might not yield easily to the rigid requirements of structural linguistics. In this research, I subscribe to sociocultural perspectives even as I uphold the distinctive view that classrooms do not offer the sole narrative to formal learning, in as much as language is used both within and outside of the classroom.

To sum up, ‘linguistic analysis reaches its limit whenever language is perceived not as a tool but as a discourse in itself, depicting contexts and identities, as well as the intricate interplay between these two in the process of learning. Hence, methodologically, when students in Cameroon universities come together to learn, be it in class or outside of the classroom, the language of such interactions should be seen as ‘*events*’, narrating the entire experience of learning, of meanings and of overlapping identities and cultures therein. Language becomes discourse, that is, meanings and actions constructed by both verbal and non-verbal texts (Cohen *et al.*, 2012). Discourse analysis, more than linguistic analysis, is therefore a more viable paradigm for the study-learning interactions as they occur within a particular context.

3.2.5 Discourse Analysis: Language of Informal Learning

Discourse analysis treats language as a ‘naturally occurring’ event within a context. In the broader sense, this is the ‘study of language above the level of sentence’ (Gee & Handford, 2013). Several theories and approaches have been constructed in order to exploit the benefits and methods of discourse analysis in relation to classroom talk

(Wilkinson *et al.*, 2008). Among these, conversation analysis is often used in the study of patterned ways of talking together in which participants or learners engage in a confined set of interactional and inferential activities (Wetherall *et al.*, 2001). While the interactional nature group talk presents features of conversation, I subscribe to Mercer's view that classroom talk 'has a natural long-term trajectory and cannot be understood only as a series of discrete educational events' (2008: p.33) or as conversations that are complete in themselves. This observation is even more relevant in the analysis of informal group talk amongst learners in Cameroon universities who tend to maintain the same learning groups overtime, and whose learning experiences are framed by implicit interpersonal presuppositions and jointly constructed understandings of implied institutional discourses. Thus, group talk, as understood in the present study, cannot be rigidly subjected to the tools of conversation analysis, for is not a fixed instance of learning which lends itself easily to stiff categories of discourse analysis. Rather, informal group talk ought to be taken as dynamic, diachronic, holistic, that is, consistent with the mutability of learner's experiences over time.

Thus, a proper approach to group talk calls requires a functional use of discourse analysis, different rigid approaches to discourse analysis which have often been applied to classroom interactions (Bannick & van Dam, 2007). I subscribe to more sophisticated approaches to discourse analysis that are capable of capturing both the formal and the 'messy' nature of classroom talk. An example is Gee's (2011) approach to discourse analysis which incorporates both a 'theory of language-in-use' and an appropriate methodology. He achieves this by proposing an explanation of the intricate interplay between the study of contextually specific meaning of language-in-use, which he identifies as 'pragmatics', and the study of how sentences and utterances pattern together to create meaning across multiple sentences and utterances (Gee, 2011; Gee & Handford, 2013). In practice, his use of discourse analysis provides a framework that captures the fluidity and the complexities of language-in-use, particularly the messy-conversational style language proper to learners who are familiar with each other and who are in a common quest for meaningful learning experiences (also see Mercer, 2000).

Within the formal classroom, the functional approach to discourse analysis allows for a better understanding of learning interactions and also highlights the importance of

the social context which makes meaning possible (Gee, 2011). From a broad view of the literature, Bannick and van Dam suggest that

...[L]earning and thinking, educational success and failure, are discursively constructed in social situations as a result of the sense-making processes that participants bring to bear upon them' (2007: p.283).

In this sense, classroom practitioners are naturally drawn to the use of theories and research paradigms which aim at improving classroom practice. Often framed within a social constructivist perspective, classroom talk is often investigated as a tool in the hands of the educator (Vygotsky, 1978) who has the responsibility to guide and scaffold learning towards intended outcomes. This makes the agency of the teacher indispensable in most classroom based research. The teacher is one who facilitates exploratory talks or 'scaffold' learning tasks in order to meet predefined learning outcomes (Mercer & Fisher, 1999). As Cadzen observes:

the teacher has the role of validating student's present meaning, often grounded in personal experience, leading the child into additional meanings, and additional ways with words form, expressing them in ways that reflect more public and educated forms of knowledge (2001: p.22).

Hence, beyond the 'controlled' setting of the classroom, research on learners' ability to pursue exploratory talks is limited. In fact, group talk is scarcely seen from the perspective of learners as a valuable, self-directed strategy which allows them in their learning experiences to 'construct' or develop particular understanding of knowledge.

In principle, this void at the tertiary level of learning deserves more research attention, lest it challenges fundamental assumptions about higher education; the assumption that adult learners take more responsibility in their learning. Indeed, there is a need to explore student talk outside of the scaffolding frame of the classroom, that is, as purely a learners' initiative, sustained by learners, to achieve what they themselves perceive as concrete learning objectives. This, obviously, requires a new way of conceiving learning through an integrated approach which takes seriously learners' ability to use lan-

guage, even in its most dishevelled form, to their learning advantage. To this end, discourse analysis must view the language of learning not as an end in itself, but a medium of social interaction, embedded within the context in which it is used.

3.3 Claiming ‘Informal’ Learning Spaces

The preceding section of this research establishes the limit of the concept of collaborative learning in describing the informal learning experiences of university learners in Cameroon outside of standard academic practices. The next section will provide a theoretical foundation for the conceptualization of learning as an ‘informal’ collaborative experience. It starts with an assessment of the argument that epistemological considerations essentially determine the way one views group learning activities when students come together.

3.3.1 Substantive and Epistemological Considerations

There seems to be a growing realization among research theorists in education that what constitutes learning is “discursively constructed in social situations because of the sense-making processes that participants bring to bear upon them” (Bannick & van Dam, 2007: p.283; Cazden, 1988; Hall, 1998; Kramsch, 2002; and Wegerif, 2008). Wegerif contends that there is a constant need to question and to align one’s ontological assumptions, that is, one’s enquiry into the ultimate nature of being, ‘what there really is’, to research enquiries. Failure to do so, he argues, has often led to widespread misunderstanding of certain concepts used in research (Wegerif, 2008: p.347-8). In collaborative learning research, for example, the concept ‘dialogue’ is commonly used to refer to verbal and non-verbal interactions amongst learners. However, without proper preliminary discussions, substantiated by one’s ontological and epistemological assumptions, the use of the word might rather obscure than shed light on the very learning activities that it seeks to describe. For, ‘dialogue’, can be interpreted either from a Vygotskian ‘*dialectic*’ perspective or from a Bakhtinian ‘*dialogic*’ perspective (as described below). In one-way or the other, there are far reaching implications on how learning is understood, applied and measured, in specific contexts.

It is owing to this imperative that White's review (2014) investigates the philosophical underpinnings of dialogue as used in research, highlighting the fundamental differences between '*dialogic*' and its near-synonymy - '*dialectic*'. The '*dialectic*' understanding of dialogue is essentially a Vygotskian construct, with theoretical credits to philosophers like Hegel, Spinoza, Engels, and Marx, while the '*dialogic*' understanding is essentially Bakhtin with philosophical connections to members of the Bakhtin circle like Dostoevsky and Rabelais. Both concepts, according to White, have in common the socio-historic context of the Stalin-Marxist Russian society, which made such epistemological incompatibilities and contradictions possible (White, 2014: p.220). Expounding on this distinction but with direct implication on learning interactions in the classroom, Wegerif writes:

The term '*dialogic*' is frequently appropriated to a neo-vygotskian or sociocultural tradition. However, Vygotsky's theory is dialectic, not dialogic. From a dialogic perspective, the difference between voices in dialogue is constitutive of meaning in such a way that it makes no sense to imagine '*overcoming*' this difference. By contrast, due to the implicit assumption that meaning is ultimately grounded on identity rather than upon difference, the dialectic perspective applied by Vygotsky interprets differences as '*contradictions*' that need to be overcome or transcended (Wegerif, 2008: p.347).

In concrete terms, collaborative learning, in general, is founded on dialogue between participants. But the purpose and aim of dialogue is necessarily framed by ontological and epistemological considerations that both participants and researchers bring to bear upon dialogue. For example, when students come together to study in informal peer groups, therefor are bound to be differences and even conflict between them as learners. From a Vygotskian perspective, learning is dialectic, aiming at inter-subjectivity, given that learners seek to construct common knowledge from a multiplicity of perspectives. For that reason, the role of the teacher within the classroom setting as an arbitrator of differences would be justified. On the contrary, a dialogic perspective or ontology will not view learning as a problem-solving exercise, seeking to eliminate conflict. It assumes that meaning arises only in the context of difference. In other words, when a Bakhtinian dialogue is assumed, then creativity, learning to learn, and an ethics of openness to the other are relatively easy to understand. This is due to the development of closely related fruits of deeper identification within the space of dialogue itself (Wegerif, 2005; 2008; Bakhtin, 1986).

Dall’Alba and Barnacle (2012) suggests that the future of higher education depends not only on the technical transfer and acquisition of knowledge but also on a necessary ‘ontological turn’ which alone can truly engage learners at the deepest level of their beings. It is on these grounds that the informal learning environments which students create for themselves outside of standard university classrooms and spaces can be considered as viable learning circles, otherwise they are *lost in translation*; that is, unaccounted for within teaching and learning discourse in higher education.

3.3.2 ‘Informal’ Collaborative Learning as ‘Dialogic’ Space

In analysing dialogue in informal collaborative learning, there is need to go beyond its dialectic-centred representation; beyond locating the process and function of dialogue within the teacher-learner matrix, in the controlled area of the classroom. When students get together to learn outside of the standard learning environment, dialogue takes on a more creative turn; the rules of language yield to creativity, to code switching, and to an unpredictable representation and interaction which learners perceive as intended learning outcomes. Group talk and dialogue, in this context, seems to lend itself to a dialogic representation, owing more to the Bakhtinian understanding of dialogue, not just as a linguistic activity, but also as a hermeneutical sociocultural space, related both to the meaning of talk generated therein and to the way in which it is understood and how such understandings help in shaping learners’ sense of identity. Space and learning are intrinsically intertwined; space is embedded in the learning process itself and learning is determined by space. Both interact recursively to generate meaning and reinforce identities.

3.3.3 Bakhtin’s Concept of Dialogue

The word ‘dialogue’ generally evokes interpersonal and socio-linguistic relationships that ordinary language often describes as ‘conversation,’ ‘social interactions,’ or even ‘group talk.’ In Bakhtin’s view, in addition to this linguistic approach, dialogue provides both the ontological and the epistemological frame of reference for human consciousness. There is nothing but dialogue; “where consciousness began, there dialogue began” (Bakhtin, 1981: p.41; see. Farmer, 1998). He continues:

“to be”, means to be for the other and through him, for oneself. Man has no internal sovereign territory; he is always on the boundary; looking within himself he looks in the eyes of the other or through the eyes of the other. I cannot do without the other; I cannot become myself without the other; I must find myself in the other; finding the other in me in mutual reflection and perception. (Bakhtin, 1984: p.311-312)

Dialogue explains social relations, and relationship with the rest of the world in an organic manner; for in dialogue,

‘a person participates wholly and through his whole life (...). He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium’ (Bakhtin, 1984: p.293).

Bakhtin’s dialogism shapes and orients the purpose of all knowing; for everything is understood as part of a greater whole in which there is constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. Language, speech, or in Bakhtin’s word, ‘utterance’ is that which expresses the relationship between meanings. Utterances are only temporary affirmations because they are subject to change by the very fact that they are opened to further dialogue (Emerson & Holquist, 1981).

Hence, when learners come together to learn, emerging group talk can be considered as utterances, which do not and cannot express the ultimate truth; but which make the collective quest for ‘truth’ possible; for truth by itself is both a function and a product of social relations (Farmer, 1998). Dialogic reasoning consists in engaging the truth where it is to be found; in the space ‘in-between’ a plurality of dialogic subjects (Bakhtin, 1984: p.81).

Cognitively, dialogic reasoning is made possible thanks to what Bakhtin calls the ‘internally persuasive discourse’, the ability and the process of the subject’s consciousness to develop a voice of its own from a range of other possible utterances and discourses. In stark contrast to dialog is the concept of ‘*official monologism*’. Applied to informal collaborative learning, the experiences of learners are dialogic, in as much as individually and collectively, they constitute an internally persuasive discourse, different from, though not necessarily at odds with the ‘official monologic’ discourse of the classroom. Bakhtin further makes possible a convincing theorisation of the relationship between the internally persuasive spaces that learners create for themselves, and the official learning space of the classroom, where learners are largely subjected to institutional or propositional knowledge.

Essentially, in Bakhtinian understanding, monologic discourse is resistant to internal persuasive discourse, and internal persuasive discourse is resistant to monologism. This is because monologism ‘pretends to possess a ready-made truth’ and expresses itself in ‘naïve self-confidence of people who think they know something, that is, who think they possess certain truths’ (Bakhtin, 1984). As Bakhtin argues:

we acknowledge it [monologic discourse], that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it. The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. It is *prior* discourse. It is therefore not a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are its equal. It is given (it sounds) in lofty spheres, not those of familiar contact. Its language is a special (as it were hieratic) language. It can be profaned. It is akin to taboo, i.e., a name that must not be taken in vain (Bakhtin, 1981: p.342, emphasis in original text).

With respect to this research, knowledge received within the historical and pedagogic conditioning of the classroom is considered imbibed with the authority that Bakhtin describes above. It is knowledge dialectically demonstrated, constructed, handed down, received and venerated, within formal classroom setting, as established truths that must be accounted for as the very essence of university learning. Unlike the authoritative discourse, *internal persuasive discourse*, sustained by an open and informal dialogic space, can creatively ‘recast’ whatever established truths may be into new contexts, and ever expanding it into new realms of understanding.

Internal persuasive discourse is dynamic and closely assimilated into the subject’s own words. In dialogue, it borders with another discourse, either established or in the making, or with other dialogic subjects. It achieves meaning through their repartee, as utterances and discourses interact with each other (Farmer, 1998) in a non-contradicting manner. As Wells contends, dialogic learning can be conceived of as occurring within a monologic-internally persuasive continuum in dialogic tension with one another, and with far reaching implications on how knowledge is conceptualised, depending on what end of the continuum is privileged over the other (Wells, 2014: p.171).

The internally persuasive end of the spectrum allows for the conceptualisation of knowledge as a progressive discourse. From a pedagogic perspective, and regarding collaborative learning, this means encouraging learners to develop active knowledge that arises from their current experience-based understandings, in relation to problems in their respective disciplines. Learning interactions will then consist in forming and testing conjectures, offering and critiquing explanations, to arrive at a deeper understanding than at the initial starting point, and formulating this understanding in a language that is appropriate to the context of learning. This form of knowledge seeks to resist institutional or monologic knowledge, which places emphasis on ‘what is known.’ This knowledge is an accumulated ‘outcome of formal procedures,’ which has been ‘critically evaluated and formally documented according to historically developed practices of the particular institutions’ (Wells, 2014: p.171). Effective dialogic teaching and learning occur in a recursive relationship between individual knowing and established knowledge:

Authoritative texts continue to be interpreted in new contexts of action, which in turn leads to discourse among participants that augments both individual and collective understanding; conversely, an individual's knowing, if it builds on institutionally sanctioned knowledge and is formulated in an appropriate written genre, may eventually contribute to the revision or extension of what is known (Wells, 2014: p.171).

In research, Bakhtin’s ideas seem to have drawn attention to the ‘ineffable’ and liberating effect of learning and teaching interactions more than structural linguistics. At the same time, even as Bakhtin has become prominent in educational research, recent reviews of education literature have highlighted the missed opportunities in education research and practice regarding the effective use of Bakhtin (Matusov, 2007). It argues that the full effect Bakhtin’s critical view to discourse, through his notion of internally persuasive discourse, is yet to be felt in education research, even though it is his greatest contribution to education. He attributes this to a lack of clarity in Bakhtin’s own thoughts. The excitement in using Bakhtin in several disciplines has led to a growing philological confusion on the exact meaning of each of his concepts which are often lost in translation, especially in western languages. Consequently, even in the hands of renowned scholars, Bakhtin is not always evoked in the most accurate ways possible. Often, researchers have used Bakhtinian terms to describe practices that are essentially

non-bakhtinian. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), in their seminal work on how to analyse classroom discourse, revealed that teachers often appropriate discourses of their pupils, forcing them into an authoritative teacher frame and denying learners a voice. Similarly, Alexander uses the word ‘dialogic teaching’ to describe learning processes within the classroom that, according to distinctions established above, can best be described as dialectic, given the central role of the teacher in scaffolding learning outcome (2005).

Likewise, recent scholars like Hellerman (2005) see learning through talking as being essentially a ‘quiz game’, a metaphor borrowed from a television game show, to analyse interactive talk in a 9th grade physics class classroom, leading to a rather mechanical approach to a rich set of conversational data. In revisiting and analysing Sinclair & Coulthard’s 37 years old data, using a framework of *Conversation Analysis*, Skidmore & Murakami (2012) contend that knowledge is produced within the polyphony of student-teacher dialogue. In another stance, Wells (2014) dwells on the word ‘reframing,’ which though dialogic in its intent, in practice serves as a scaffolding tool, thus dialectic, in analysing learning interactions. Though endorsing a Vygotskian structural approach to talk with ground-rules and reflections, Sutherland (2015) draws attention to other aspects of classroom culture, practice and identity that can best be engaged and sustained from a dialogic perspective.

While it is true that the appropriate translation of Bakhtin remains a work in progress, in the hands of western philologists, it would seem compelling to argue, like Matusov (2007) that education as historically structured and institutionalised in the west, is yet to open up to the radical transformation that Bakhtin’s critical view on educational discourse implies. The radical component of his thought is rooted in his dialogic understanding of human freedom, which is conceivable only when one ‘comes into collision ‘with’ accepted convention of any kind,’ (Bakhtin, 1984: p.11–12).

In analysing talk, this means that every utterance, speech or discourse always has a gap, which accompanies it ‘like a shadow’ (Bakhtin, 1981) and holds potential for alternate meaning. There is no room for the finalisation or classification of achieved ideas that is proper to institutional knowledge. White (2014) suggests that his opposition to the pos-

sible end of an idea represents a direct challenge to Vygotsky who aimed at inter-subjectivity as the educational endpoint. This position is widely favoured in educational activity today, and as part and parcel of knowledge that is created and exported from the west. Researchers, though recognising the benefits of *internally persuasive discourse* in learning and teaching interactions, have largely remained servile to traditional research methods that are consonant with ‘dialectic’ learning processes and that tend to weaken the liberating effect of free or unrestrained dialogic interactions associated with Bakhtin.

In all, the full effect of dialogic reasoning cannot be experienced in learning without a full ontological, epistemological and methodological ‘turn’ (Wegerif, 2008; White, 2009; 2014). This, obviously, allows for a reconfiguration of learning spaces, and a proper understanding of how subjects interact within these spaces, both collectively and individually, to generate meanings and to shape their cultural sense of identity.

3.3.4 Conceptualizing Informal Space as Dialogic Space

Unlike physical learning spaces of the classrooms, Bakhtin’s dialogic claim about learning spaces gives priority to the process of ‘knowing’ rather than to ‘what is known’ and to how knowledge is legitimised. It allows for the ‘informal’, that is, aesthetic aspects of learning that seem to erode when learning is locked into the formal and authoritative discourse, driven by ‘ground rules’ of teachers, classrooms, structures and institutional culture. As such, it is a useful base for generating theories on ‘informal’ learning experiences in terms of space. A few Bakhtinian concepts complement each other and provide a useful starting point.

The notion of *voice* translates the social location of its speaker, for every word used in language has a ‘taste’ of all the contexts and social location in which it has lived its charged life (Bakhtin, 1981: p.293). The choice of words of each speaker in group talk represents a vast array of social location. Not all words represent their speaker’s social location. Sometime the latter speaks in a voice or in voices that are foreign to their own social location but that express social situations that are required in speech. This is known as *ventriloquating*. As such, speakers can position themselves in speech by

speaking or juxtaposing through other voices. When several voices come together in a particular social situation they constitute an utterance. In each utterance, there is both the voice of the speaker and the voice of the social situation by which utterances draw upon and speak through. *Addressivity* is a concept that Bakhtin uses to define ‘the quality of turning to someone else’ in every utterance (Bakhtin 1986: p.99). This means that speaker’s utterances are quintessentially open to and connected with other previous utterances in ways that transcend space and time (Haworth, 1999), and account for growth as a necessary component of dialogue and interaction. In education, this accounts for interpersonal interactions as the ‘awareness of the otherness of language in general and of given dialogic partners in particular’ (Clark & Holquist, 1984: p.217). *Addressivity* makes possible the recursive overlapping of a speaker’s perspective in relation to others, and in relation to what might be considered established knowledge.

Furthermore, *addressivity* can be related to Bakhtin’s earlier notion of *heteroglossia* (Bakhtin, 1981). *Heteroglossia* refers to the ‘condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance’ (Holquist, 2006: p.429). It characterises the spacio-temporal frame within which *addressivity* occurs. *Heteroglossia* is the site of ‘polyphony’, a sort of ‘dialogic classroom,’ where ‘many-voices’, present in individual utterances, interact with each other. All utterances are thus *polyphonic* and *heteroglot*, in as much as they allow for an embodiment of ‘different voices,’ and exist in the ‘*in-between-ness*’ of successive utterances. They must also be conditioned by historical, social and cultural features which ensure that words or actions uttered in that place and at that time will have a different meaning than they would have under any other conditions (Holquist, 2006; Park-Fuller, 2009).

As such, taken together, both concepts from Bakhtin allow for a heuristic construction of learning spaces as extra-spatial where the collective quality of individual voices of learners, framed in convoluting utterances, interact in context. In that interaction, they recursively open new horizons of meaning and identity, both for those directly involved and for their learning communities.

This means at least two things for learning. Firstly, learning space is elastic and offers endless possibilities for expansion. Each utterance is by itself a space of interaction for

many voices. Then, each learner, by virtue of his or her openness to ‘other’ utterances and voices, is a learning ‘space’ harbouring endless possibilities of meaning. Furthermore, as a group, when learners come together space is widened further, as individual voices and identities interact, creating newer meanings and newer identities. Lastly, space is widened even further when learners, in their collective unity, are turned towards other voices beyond their unit of interactions; other voices not limited to individuals and groups but also institutions and the wider socio-cultural community to which they belong.

The second implication of this definition of ‘space’ is that it subverts the notion of ‘classroom’ as a physical learning environment. From a Bakhtinian stand point, a physical classroom or institution of learning, it would appear, does not necessarily signify a viable learning space; while the lack of physical space for learning does not imply its absence. On the contrary, where there is openness to ‘otherness’ and to new possibilities of meaning and identities, there, there is dialogue and space for learning. Hence, more than the formality of physical or institutional presence, what seems most characteristic of viable learning spaces are the possible conditions of its openness to ‘otherness’. This stands in tension with forces of ‘close-ness’ which are equally active in their effort to undermine the turn towards others.

In fact, Bakhtin explains this tension from a sociolinguistic perspective, which can be applied to learning as well. Dialogue occurs between two opposing, competing and conflicting social and linguistic forces known as *centripetal* and *centrifugal* forces: *Centripetal* forces, on the one hand, seek to unify, standardise and centralise language around what is known and established. They attempt to silence the unconventional and the uncontrolled discourse by denying them existence. On the other hand, *centrifugal* forces can be associated to the internally-persuasive discourse as it seeks to undo and challenge unifying forces (Bakhtin, 1981), and with it all authoritative and monologic pretences. The relationship between these forces reflects a deeper tension that bears so profoundly upon the consciousness of subjects of dialogue, either individually or collectively, as well as between authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse (Farmer, 1998).

In Bakhtin's writings, the nature of this dialogic tension is best exemplified by his interest and sociolinguistic representation of carnivals of the middle ages (Bakhtin, 1984). In the *Carnivalesque*, Bakhtin's readers have often seen a theatrical representation of the power of internal persuasive discourse in 'de-crowning' authoritative-monologic discourses through parody and humour. By so doing, they provide a profound and collective engagement with alternative 'truths' to the overbearing, the dogmatic and the officious. Taken as an epistemological construct, this approach of perceiving and interacting with truth has three dimensions (Smith & Matusov, 2009), made possible through the Bakhtinian *carnival*:

- (ii) truth as the possibility of reason over dogma;
- (iii) truth as possible outcome of 'informal', and sometimes unconventional social interactions like humour, mockery and even collective insobriety;
- (iv) and, truth as intrinsically related to identities of social actors.

While Bakhtin's original intent was to show how this occurs within the same language or speech, this research seeks to provide a conceptual milieu for the different levels of learners' engagement in the dialogic process. This means that when students come together to study at unconventional places and times around Cameroon universities, learning activities cannot be thought of as completely autonomous; that is, ideologically removed from ordinary learning experiences of the classroom. Rather these two exist in dialogic tension with one another.

In fact, informal learning groups could be thought of as existing in 'discursive' parallels to formal learning space of the classroom. Hence, the concept of 'informal' refers to learning spaces that exist outside of formal learning spaces of the university, that provide learners with the opportunity to engage with the process of 'knowing' in a way that the formal institutional setting does not allow. In that space, relatively free from the direct centralising forces of the institution, they position themselves such that they can better engage in the institutional discourse. However, in theory, informal spaces are an integral part of the university learning environment in as much as they allow students to strategically engage in their learning in ways that allow them to achieve specific

learning outcomes. This means that as students carry on learning in informal collaborative learning groups, they are not only in dialogue with peers, but also with the institution and the learning community to which they belong.

Summarily, learning processes are not always as simple as they appear (Akyeampong, 2006). Bakhtin's dialogism makes it possible to envision an integrative approach to learning; one that considers aesthetic features of students learning experiences that otherwise would be *lost in translation*. So, as most learners in Cameroon universities gather in little groups and at unconventional places and times to learn, their talk that might at first appear to be discordant, because of the often informal, pseudo-theatrical nature, sometime laced with disruptive laughter and side comments, at a closer look, is in fact expressing a collective and newer quality. This results in a symphony of individual learner voices in their context and calls for a new framework of analysis, capable to translating raw data from informal group talk into viable insights on learning, culture and identity formation in process within a context.

3.4 Strategic Self-Positioning: An Analytical Framework

For individual learners, the obvious purpose of meeting and interacting with peers is primarily to achieve objectives that they consider specific to their learning in that particular context. This means that to understand learning processes involved, one must analyse discourses produced by these interactions, with their specific discursive formations and strategies. However, as seen above, sociolinguistic paradigms do not account for the 'situated-ness' of discourse, and so cannot provide a valuable framework of analysis. Sociocultural perspectives, on the other hand, take seriously the contexts of language and discourse from which meanings and identities are derived, but with the limitation that they tend to focus on structures and institutions, at the expense of individual learner's agency, as the basis of meaning in discourse. In exploring informal collaborative learning discourse as basis for meaning and identity formation, there is need for an analytical framework that establishes the basis of meaning not on the principles of grammar, but on the dynamic context provided by the informal space; at the same time, not on the rigidity of contexts and structures and institutions, but on the learners' ability to make strategic choices that position them in discourse. Dialogism

(Bakhtin, 1981; 1984; and 1986) associated to elements of sociocultural perspectives is a theoretic blend that provides a useful analytical framework for the analysis of group talk.

Elements of Bakhtin's dialogism have been used for sociolinguistic analysis of generated discourse (Wortham & Locher, 1996), as well as in conjunction with sociocultural perspectives to analysis of mega-narratives of learners' experiences in specific institutional contexts (Vågan, 2011). Analysis of group talk from a dialogic view point, with emphasis on how learning interactions in context account for the construction of understanding of knowledge, can open a new vista of understanding about learners' perspectives in learning.

This is possible because learners through their voices, imbedded in utterances, speeches and discourse, actively participate in the process of 'knowing.' At the same time, meanings produced are based not on the rules of grammar but on dialogue rooted in learners' distinctive social and cultural frames of references. It is in the clashing of voices, of roles, and of different frames of references that new understandings of knowledge are constructed and developed, as part of the meaning making process within a community. Analysis will then focus on how learners, through their voices in dialogue 'strategically position' themselves in constructing understands of knowledge in ways that are relevant to their context of learning.

Sociocultural theorists view positional identities as having "to do with the day-to-day and on-the-ground relations of power, deference, entitlement, social affiliation and distance -with the social-interactional, social relational structures of the lived world" (Holland *et al.*, 1998: p.127). Therefore, with a focus on how people place themselves socially in interaction or take stances relative to those of other people, thereby explaining the meaning of those actions (Vågan, 2011: p.45). Here, 'positioning' is used with reference to how learners choose to strategically situate their voices in on-going learning discourses, and how the choices contribute to constructing understanding of knowledge with specific academic communities. Thus, examining informal collaborative learning in Cameroon consists in the study of group talks, whereby learners *position* themselves

within discourses with a shared understanding about knowledge; how these are perceived, challenged, constructed, de-constructed, and re-constructed in the Cameroonian context. The assumption here is that in group talk, learners both individually and collectively play active ‘transformative’ roles in validating, challenging, generating, and creating meaning and identities that are consonant with objectives that they perceive as relevant to their learning, and to the wider community to which they belong. (Hodges, 1998; Lineham & McCarthy, 2001; Sullivan *et al.*, 2009)

CHAPTER FOUR

“OR ELSE, ALL IS TRANSLATION”: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological paradigm used for this research. In addition to the underlying reasons for its selection, the chapter discusses its strengths and limitations with respect to the different theoretical underpinnings and research questions raised. This is followed by a careful construction of the research design based on the objectives that are outlined and the strategies by which the research questions will be answered. These include issues related to sampling and inclusion criteria of participants in the study. The second section of the chapter justifies how the data was collected and analysed along with an assessment of ethical considerations. Finally issues of reliability, limitations and generalizability are discussed.

4.2 Methodological Underpinnings

By focusing on students’ learning practices outside of standard classroom teaching and learning, this research is helmed by the understanding that phenomena are often more complexed than they appear to be, and must be looked at holistically; lest they become fragmented, restricted to a few variables, at the risk of missing the necessary dynamic interaction of several parts (see Cohen *et al.*, 2008). Accordingly, in terms of methodology, to better capture students’ informal learning experiences, there is need to transcend standards cause-and-effect models or linear predictability as framework for analysis. For, simple interactions or talks amongst learners are embodiments of dynamic interactions between multiple structural-agentive factors. Hence, the current study is characterized by an attempt to move beyond the study of units of analysis like individuals, institutions, communities and systems, vying for an epistemic balance between human agency, which accounts for multiple and ‘relative truths,’ and the ‘reality’ of dynamic social structures within which human agency operates (Houston, 2001).

Applied to the study of informal group talk, this methodological perspective seems to allow for a critical engagement with constructivist assumptions about learning within the context of the university learning in Cameroon; that is, amongst students as they seek to build understandings of knowledge based on perceived assessment demands. At the same time, it also acknowledges specific social and cultural realities surrounding higher education in Cameroon, realities which though embodied by active human agency are not determined by them.

Inevitably, this approach raises important questions regarding the possibilities and limits of my role as a researcher. It asserts that human subjects, including the social researcher, can never fully have an accurate picture of the social world. We are ever limited to a 'transitive view' of the world (Lemke, 2001). This is true for university learners, as they seek to construct understanding of knowledge throughout learning, and this is equally true for the researcher that I am, as I try to make sense of students' learning experiences. Hence, unlike constructivist approaches to social research which accept all accounts as equally valid (Kenwood, 1999), as a researcher, I am engaged in a process of *knowing* 'that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower.' The only access the knower has to this reality 'lies along the spiraling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known [...]' (Wright, 1992: p.35; also see Lemke, 2001); that is, between knowledge as the object of teaching and learning, and knowledge as learners' construction of their understanding of what is taught; between my observation of learners' experiences of group talk, and my understanding and perceptions derived from my analysis of these experiences.

I recognize the risk of bias in my appreciation and critique of data through this framework. However, while the possibilities of such biases and of 'over-doing' my role as a researcher are evident, it would be a fallacy to envision qualitative research without them (Gewirtz & Cribbs, 2006; Hammersley, 2008). For this reason, I agree with Lather's fundamental claim that discourses

...happen in a shifting and dynamic social context in which the existence of multiple sets of power relations are inevitable (1991: p. vii).

Hence, in this study, I take seriously recommendations by Dunne *et al.* (2005) that instead of deflecting the attention away from the pivotal role of the researcher in analyzing and interpreting data, the latter must make use of reflexivity to ‘monitor his or her own sociality’ within the fluid social conditions in which the research account has been constructed (Dunne *et al.*, 2005: p. 87).

Closely related to the question of reflexivity is that of my positionality, considering that the way I perceive myself and the way I am perceived, have far reaching implications throughout the data collection, analysis, interpretation and writing processes (Sharan *et al.*, 2010; Choi, 2006). I am a male researcher and Cameroonian national, researching in Cameroon, within an academic and social context with which I am familiar, owing to my previous experience as an undergraduate student and to my current experience as a lecturer in another university within the same education system. This is further compounded by my cross-ethnic sense of self which undoubtedly influences my perception of social reality in Cameroon. I was raised and educated in the English-speaking subsystem of education, where I am often positioned, based on ethnic considerations as a French speaking Cameroonian. Also, I lecture in another university located in another town, different from those involved in this research which places me in an insider/outsider conflict situation. So, I am aware, in my research, that this ethnic, cultural, and professional flux of identities can generate biases that cannot be completely resolved by declaring myself either as an outsider or as an insider to the research situations. In fact, from a cultural perspective, researchers can be insiders and outsiders to research participants at many different levels and at different times (Villenas, 1996: p.722). Banks points out that the interpretation of our life experiences

...is mediated by the interaction of a complex set of status variables, such as gender, social class, age, political affiliation, religion, and region (Banks, 1998: p.5)

Maintaining a critical balance between who I am as a researcher, how I am perceived by participants, and the limits of my ‘knowing’ calls for critical reflexivity throughout the research. I need to be constantly aware that as a researcher, my past experiences, at

home and abroad, contribute in framing my perceptions. The research subject also requires that I infiltrate or at least gain access to intimate learning environment that students have successfully carved out for themselves, mindful that my interpretation of these experiences might differ from participant's own perceptions and views of these same experiences. This involves research pathway involves critical ethical considerations from which I cannot separate myself. But being aware, transparent and reflexive about them is important because the principles of validity and reliability of my research (Dunne *et al.*, 2005).

4.3 Research Design

This exploratory research hinges on the following research question:

- How does informal collaborative learning influence students' learning at Cameroonian Universities and contribute to their perceived learning outcomes and experiences?

And this question raises the following sub questions:

- a) Why do students in Cameroon universities engage in informal collaborative learning?
- b) What is the pedagogic value of student talk in an informal learning environment?
- c) How does informal collaborative learning in Cameroon universities help students achieve objectives that they consider specific to their learning?
- d) What are the socio-cultural features of informal collaborative learning in Cameroon universities?

4.3.1 Research Strategy: Multi-site Case Study

The present study can best be described as qualitative case study involving three different institutions of learning.

Qualitative researchers draw upon many disciplines, methods, and paradigms which emphasize the understanding of 'how social experience is created and given meaning' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p.13). Capturing the rather transient, fluid and dynamic

teaching-learning processes involved in informal collaborative learning, and the distinctive historical and cultural contexts in which it occurs is fundamental aspect of this study. Furthermore, analyzing informal collaborative learning in-depth, as an ‘instance in action’ (Nisbet & Watt, 1984: p.72), in the life of the average university learner in Cameroon corresponds to the methodological design of a multi-site case study. For, as foundational literature on the concept establishes, a case study is an intensive in-depth holistic study of a social phenomenon within its specific context (Miles & Huberman, 2004; Yin, 2003; Stake, 2005). A case study probes critically into different perceptions of a social reality; generates greater understanding, provides new meanings, relationships and insights that may lead to a complete reconceptualization of the phenomenon, and suggests a way forward and influence the future (Cohen, *et al.* 2007; Jerrard, 2014).

Here, case study allows for apparently banal learning interactions among students to become rich and vivid vistas for complex dynamics involved in higher education learning in context (Sturman, 1999). Unlike in other simplistic interpretative methodologies where ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973) are not immediately accessible to the researcher (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995), in this research the ‘situated-ness’ of both the researcher and the participants can be taken for granted. For the researcher that I am, this means understanding the culture of a group is central to exploring what people know, do and believe, and how they behave, interact together and work (Woods, 1986). It equally involves being concerned with the need to go beneath the meanings, views, perceptions and attributions of the participant, to cultural, social and professional realities, and to highlight the social mechanisms that facilitate these processes” (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p.141). In this case, teaching-learning processes become ‘thick’ social realities to be explored in-depth by the researcher in understanding university learning in the specific contexts of Cameroon.

4.3.2 Research Context and Participants

4.3.2.1 Profile of Research Sites

Since it is my intention to investigate learning processes out of the formal school environment, the case study focuses primarily on learners in their small learning groups. However, groups do not exist unless on the academic, social and cultural fringes of established institutions of learning. For this reason, three institutions were selected as access point to learners' collaborative groups. The purposive selection of these institutions aimed at providing maximum variation of data (Flyvbjerg, 2006) which gives access to different cultural contexts and their impact on the phenomenon under investigation.

With particular interest in social and cultural relevance of the phenomenon, samplings are based on social and cultural representations which, in Cameroon as elsewhere, are embodied in institutions and discourse. Hence, (i) an English-speaking state owned university was selected based on the criteria of social inclusion, since state owned universities are almost tuition-free; (ii) a private owned university with limited access due to user fees constrains; and (iii) another state-owned university based on the French speaking subsystem of education. They have been coded in this report as UB, CU and UD to protect institutions and participants' identities. At the same time, I am aware of the geographic situated-ness of the research which it possible for some who is well versed with the context of learning in Cameroon to recognise certain aspects described and represent in illustrations. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants are central to research practice, even as Crow and Wiles (2008) review of research which utilise anonymised data of participant and digital images raise salient questions highlighting ambiguities involve in upholding this crucial ethical value in social research. In the shifting terrain of the digital age and the growing implications to research alongside evolving research regulations, these authors argue, it remains a challenge to hold together, in a single research, need for absolute anonymity, the expectations that participants hold, and the tension between the practicality and the impracticality to the research in providing a distinctive social context. Ethical issues related to individual participants are further discussed below, but regarding institutions, maximum effort towards anonymity is observed. In addition to the fact that the focus of this present study is outside of the formal settings of learning, and so do not involve institutions directly, distinctive features of institutions are not represented either visually or descriptively. In

additions, appropriate and formal research authorisations from competent authorities were sought and obtained from two universities most referred in this study. Institutions presented the following characteristic features:

Capacity of Participating Universities						
University	UB		CU		UD	
Region of Cameroon	English-speaking		English-speaking		French-speaking	
Language of instruction	English		English		French	
Largest lecture hall planned capacity and actual use ¹	Planned Capacity	Actual Use	Planned Capacity	Actual Use	Planned Capacity	Actual Use
	Amphi 750	± 850	100	± 150	Amphi 500	± 2000

Table 1: Profile of universities included in this research. Amphi = Amphitheatre

Chances of variation and correlation were increased both by the geographical proximity of UB and CU, and geographical distances of UD. Nonetheless, all three universities are within a reachable geographical area but require traveling a distance radius of about 60 kilometers from where I am currently located by car.

All three universities operate under the regulatory framework provided by the states and are driven by current global discourses on higher education and by the fluid of influential socio-cultural factors that are specific to Cameroonian or Africa universities today. So, it is taken for granted here, that these institutions are representative of the economic, social and cultural landscape of higher education provision in Cameroon.

Given that this research focused on learning behaviors outside of official learning spaces, an official request for formal access to in the universities campuses was considered solely because field data collection involved meeting students on campuses, where they also gathered in small groups during non-official school hours and on weekends.

¹ Data on lecture halls sizes and capacity are collected from learners' testimonies and narratives on learning experiences of the university classroom.

Official access was sought and obtained from UB and CU, where the major part of the data for this study was collected. At UD, the formalities and bureaucracy involved in obtaining institutional clearance limited access to collect data on campus. As such, research in UD was limited to random groups in students' lodging facilities situated outside of campus. A total of 5 random groups' interactions were audio recorded. A group of third year students in Psychology was observed twice. Discourse was transcribed and translated as need from the original French version to English.

4.3.2.2 Profile of Participating Groups and Participants

Initially within each learning environment, as many small groups as possible were targeted and based on the criteria of (i) accessibility and frequency of meetings; (ii) level of study; (iii) subject of study; (iv) gender parity and disparity; and (v) age parity and disparity. Based on established contacts, several small groups were retained for subsequent visits. Below is the profile of a few groups from UB and CU that were visited or audio/video recorded more than five times. Groups that did not meet these criteria are considered random groups.

Group	Gender	De- partment	No. of sessions observed	No. of focus group dis- cussions carried out	Data available
UB1	3 boys + 1 girl	Agriculture	6	1	audio, observation notes, photographs
UB2	3 girls	Agriculture	10	2	observation notes, video, audio, photos
UB3	4 boys + 1 girl	Accounting	5	1	observation notes, audio, photos
rUB	–	–	32	8	audio, observation notes, photos, video

Table 2: Number of participants from UB groups visited or recorded more than five times

Group	Gender	Department	No. of Sessions observed	No. of focus group dis- cussions carried out	Data available
CU1	6 girls + 5 boys	Engineering	6	1	observation notes, photos, audio
CU2	4 girls + 1 boys	School of Business	5	2	observation notes, vi- deo, audio, photos
CU3	3 girls	Agriculture	5	1	observation notes, Audio, photos
rCU	–	–	27	11	audio, photos, video, observation notes

Table 3: CU groups visited or recorded more than five times ('r' = 'random')

Groups visited were coded as follows: UB1, UB2, UB3, representing first year students, second year and third year students respectively. CU1, CU2, CU3 are freshman year, Softmore year, and Junior years respectively, also corresponding to first, second and third year of studies. Senior or fourth year students were not included in this research because they were not present on campus most of the period the research was carried out. Several random groups were also observed in both universities. This includes groups that I came across once or who were audio record once or twice in my absence. They are represented in data using codes related to their respective institutions but pre-fixed by the letter 'r' symbolising their 'random' categorisation.

In quoting data, I distinguished between sessions observed through video recordings and sessions observed physically but that were audio recorded for transcription and analysis. As such, the letters ‘a’ and ‘v’ are inserted correspondingly between the letters of the alphabetical codes representing the institutions and the numerical code representing their level of study. Hence, *UBv2* refers to a video recording that was conducted in institution *UB* involving second year students. *rCUa1* will stand for *random audio* set of data from *CU* involving students in the Junior or first year. Also, in the analysis of data, group talk is contextualised where necessary and possible regarding the subject and topic being discussed by learners. The exact locations and settings of interactions are also indicated where necessary, but with due consideration for anonymity they are not overstated.

4.3.3 Research Methods and Instruments

Based on Silverman’s definition of qualitative research (2006; also Cohen *et al.*, 2007), this research project entails an empirical study on what people do in their natural context. This calls for a careful and rigorous attention on how data is collected, stored, analysed and reported; which is a crucial consideration in qualitative case study that tend to diversify data collection and analysis (Creswell, 1998) in its attempt to capture that ‘thicknesses of the social experience under study. As defined by research aims and questions, drawing close to the informal experience of collaborative learning in line with the research questions of this study guided the overarching motif of data collection and treatment.

With critical realism as research paradigm framing research questions that focus on exploring understandings and meanings derived from participants and their actions, dialogic methods were used to capture instances-in-action of interactions among participants, and derive in-depth understanding of such interactions. Therefore, I used participant observation (Appendix 4.2) to capture learner’s interactions among themselves as well as verbal or non-verbal interactions as ‘thick’ on meanings and perspectives that learners make of their small group learning experiences. In addition, immediately following observations sessions, and depending on access and group availability, several

random focus group interviews were conducted, to give access both to individual and collective voices and insight on meanings constructed in preceding interactions.

4.3.3.1 Participant Observation

Participant observation is one of the main research methods adopted by ethnographers. In this study, I subscribe to Atkinson and Hammersley's (1994) view that social research 'is a form of participant observation, because we cannot study the social world without being part of it.' This means that the presence of a researcher within the vicinity of social phenomenon necessary entails a form or degree of participation. However, as a method, research participant observation relies on 'watching, listening, asking questions and collecting things' (Lecompton & Pressel, 1993, p.196). Hence, I made valuable descriptive research notes during each visit, on the scope and nature of interaction amongst students during informal learning environments. Striking actions, body language and group reactions that echoed research questions were noted as important indicators (Appendix 4.3). I was keen on employing observation techniques that sought to capture *in situ* the phenomenon of informal collaborative learning amongst students.

Far from being systematic and structured, the observations were rather unstructured, following the equally unstructured nature of group talk. It corresponds to the natural observation of social phenomenon (Cohen *et al.*, 2007), which seeks to capture the real social context in which the phenomenon occurs. As such, during data collection, the interactive atmosphere amongst participants is a privileged 'mirror' of the authentic collaborative learning situations that students create for themselves. Observations paid attention to issues power relations and gender as manifested among learners during group talk as related to the understanding of knowledge under construction. Thus, audio and still-video recordings of learning interactions were used to preserve 'natural-ness' of 'thick' experiences for subsequent and more analysis and observation.

Obviously, I acknowledge the risk of biases in unstructured observation in qualitative research. I am in agree with Cohen *et al.* that like other forms of data collection in the human sciences,

...observation is not a morally neutral enterprise. Observers, like other researchers have obligations to participants as well as to the research community (2007: p.413)

As an epistemological stance, critical realism challenges the researcher to constantly call to question the extent of his or her 'knowing.' In this light, observation notes written down during the research are used not as objective descriptions of reality but as preliminary interpretations that participants attribute to their actions and as basis for my initial and subsequent interpretations that I bring to learner's experience. Within the context of a qualitative case study, observation notes are read in concert with data from other methods involved, particularly from focus groups interviews. The level of participation and the kind of interaction between participants and researcher depended on multiple factors – on what was happening, and on the degree of awareness of participants of what was being studied (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

Admittedly, my role as researcher shifted with time. In observing learners, I noticed that in the beginning my interaction with participants were limited, if not minimal. But in the course of time, particularly with groups that I visited regularly, interactions intensified. Where necessary such shifts signaled openings for reflexivity and deeper understanding of group talk discourse and of learning interactions. Shifts in ideas, assumptions and previous findings were recorded in a specific research journal, together with emerging ideas and correlations for subsequent analysis. To the advantage of the research, this resulted in the identification of aspects that had not been considered in the beginning. By implication subsequent observations and focus group discussions were more focused (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

Moreover, in the course of group observation and focus group interviews, I needed to be more conscious and reflexive of my research positionality and personality, given that factors that concern the researcher directly are subject to research (Cohen *et al.*, 2007: p.145) such as attitude and behaviour. In consideration of my physiognomy that might appear imposing to some, I endeavoured consciously to be reserved and respectful of the students and of their intimate surroundings. I took time to introduce myself as a 'student' doing research with the hope of quickly accommodating whatever informal situation to which I had been granted access. The use of audio and video were

intended to preserve the original settings and discourses of informal collaborative learning. But ultimately, they also mitigated the effect that my participation and presence had on the data collection process. During sampling and testing of research instrument, in one of the groups, I participated as a covert observer, posing as a friend to one of the participants who was visiting and decided to sit in a group talk. When I revealed my intent half way into the discussions, apart from a few comments and observations, no significant differences were noted on how students participated and interacted. The enthusiasm of participants towards the topic of enquiry was the same. In fact, within few minutes my presence had become insignificant or passive again.

4.3.3.2 Focus Group Interviews

Occasionally, following participant observation sessions, small groups were randomly selected for focus group interviews. These interviews lasted between twenty minutes and one hour, depending on participants' availability and willingness to stay on after group talk. Focus group interview is a research method whereby data is collected from the interaction between members within a group who discuss a topic supplied by the researcher (see. Morgan, 1988: p.9). From an ethnographic perspective, as Silverman affirms, the '...context of the factual production of the interview itself' is central in the collection of interview data (1985: p.165). For, interviews data report on social reality as co-constructed in the interview discourse. As such, conversations with learners were centred on pre-prepared, open-ended questions that reflected the research questions of the study and served as prompts for dialogue-type interaction with the group. The use of this method is justified by the research paradigm and strategy of this study as one that seeks to capture 'naturalness' associated with the informal experience of group talk.

Focus group interviews schedules were pre-tested by a group of students at a university, unrelated to participant universities. Their valuable feedback helped in reshaping the unstructured interview protocol (Appendix 4.4). All focus group interviews were tape-recorded, allowing the researcher during interactions to occasionally make quick descriptive notes without disrupting the natural flow of conversations and interview dia-

logues. Conversation-type interviews allowed for a dynamic interaction between learners' input and research focus, as responses tended to trigger other questions were not initially intended. Thus, newer questions emerged in the process of data collection, making it possible to engage subsequent groups at a deeper level of discussion than originally intended. Careful processes such as those undertaken to strengthen research methods employed do necessarily justify claims of objectivity in social research. Nonetheless, they instil confidence in qualitative research (See. Hamersley, 1992: p.50). Focus group interview is a useful research method but even more helpful when triangulated with other traditional forms of collecting data (Morgan, 1988; Cohen *et al.*, 2007), particularly within the epistemological framework undergirding this research, one in which the researcher's objective 'knowing' is called to question.

It is characteristic of case study to provide greater depth study of a phenomenon. That is why several supportive data collection approaches and tools were useful in corroborating perceptions, allowing for in-depth holistic study of interactions (Miles & Huberman 2004; Yin, 2003; Stake, 2005). These included the purposive and strategic use of audio and video recording, photography, observational field notes and field journals.

4.3.3.3 Integrated use of Audio Recording, Video Recording and Photos

Two types of audio recordings are used in this research: audio recordings and video/audio recordings. Audio recordings focused on capturing verbal interactions amongst learners. This was done using sophisticated hand-free device, making it at the same time possible for the researcher to observe and note participants' interactions during group discussions. Mobile phones with extended recording capacity were the main recording audio devices used. Once participants' consent had been obtained, a digital mobile telephone was placed at the center of the learning space. The assumption was that a mobile telephone was more discrete than another recording device, was more like than a digital audio recorder to be assimilated amid many other electronic accessories, like scientific calculators and personal mobile telephones that students brought along to group talk session. More so, multiple recording devices allowed me to observe several small groups at the same time, in segments of thirty minutes to one hour, with

longer extensions of audio recording on non-observed segments of group talk, as such increasing variation in data.

Theories on the use of audio-visual methods in research are inevitably work-in-progress owing to the rapid development of technological innovations in the area of digital technology. I concur with Cronin (1998; see also Jerrard, 2014) that visual representations of social phenomenon are not social ‘mirrors,’ but part of the process of knowledge construction in which the researcher is directly involved in every decision related to the use of digital representations.

Also, with participants’ consent, learning sessions, particularly of groups that I was already familiar with, were audio recorded remotely in my absence to capture the ‘rawness’ of informal group learning experiences. This use of digital audio recording provided unrestricted access to intimate learning spaces that could not have been accessed otherwise (Wright *et al.*, 2010). For example, study group sessions of female learners studied late into the night in dormitories and hostels could be accessed through audio and video recording. Conscious of the fact that the use of some specialized devices in research can sometimes redefine power relations (Woodward, 2008), I was keen on using recording tools creatively in the process of capturing and reporting social phenomenon. This was intended to better reflect learners’ perception of their experiences, and provide cues for my interpretation of such experiences. For instance, in addition to audio recording, many videos were made on study sessions. However, these videos were made using a still video camera of a laptop computer. Like a mobile phone used as a recording device, still-cameras from laptops served as video camera was meant to be less intrusive, and less disruptive than a specialized video camera would have appeared in the intimate learning space that students create for themselves. Alternatively, the presence of an inconspicuous camera in the room could have contributed to what Labov (1994, p.67) terms ‘the observer’s paradox’ where the presence of an observer may alter what is being observed. Far from being a covert participation, the use of a laptop camera was helpful in granting less intrusive access to real learning experiences behind closed doors, yet effective in doing justice to this experiences as ‘instances in action’ of deeper learning experiences. This also applied to photographs of study sessions or massive classroom learning situations which, upon request, participants took

with their mobile phones and shared instantaneously with me through social media. The focus of such pictures was determined solely by learners and provided insight on aspects of interaction that they considered important.

In collecting data, I was aware of the role of recorded sounds and images in generating and sustaining dialogues with participants. This strongly resonates with the notion that photography can open dialogue between respondents' and researcher, and allow access to semi-public parts of our lives that are often inaccessible to researcher through traditional qualitative methods (Wright *et al.*, 2010; Jerrard, 2014). Hence, in some instances, I handed mobile devices to at least one members of each group, asking them to record group activity in my absence. There were also instances where I intentionally withdrew from observation sessions but relied on recordings provided by learners who were willing to assist with recording. Decisions on what segments of group talk to audio or video record, as part of my research, was significant in determining how learners perceived me as a researcher, and their understanding of valuable learning experiences in small groups which my research sought to capture. Particularly significant were interaction units that learners considered as distractions, or that only appeared on recording to be recreational noise, debates and playfulness. In each of these cases, their recording provided basis for in-depth analysis of learning processes involved in informal collaborative learning.

4.4 Fieldwork and Transcription

For this research, data was collected over a period of about five months (November 2014 to March 2015). This period corresponded to the academic calendar of universities in Cameroon as the first semester of the academic year. As required by the research questions, this allows for a natural reporting on how informal collaborative groups are constituted, structured over time and establish themselves as indispensable forum of learning during the semester.

Access to learning groups was randomly negotiated at different sites, where small group learning activities was observed, and based on cues and hints from a non-remunerated

student at UB. The latter used her personal contacts amongst students to obtain information on groups with specific features or areas of study. Based on initial interactions, subsequent observation appointments were scheduled. In CU and DU, access was negotiated on sight and subsequent observations appointments arranged. Focus group interviews were random and depended participants' willingness to sacrifice extra time for further discussion at the end of their study session.

At each new contact with a group, the procedures were standard. Once access was granted and written consent obtained (Appendix), a recording device was placed specifically at the centre of the study desk or at any strategic spot in the room or opened space. For this purpose a Samsung*Voice Recorder* Software, built into Samsung mobile telephones proved useful in recording data with near accuracy and clarity. This helped to preserve the natural setting of small group talks. Group activities were observed from a reasonable distance, but close enough to perceive both verbal and non-verbal interactions. When and where possible, especially at opened campuses where several small groups gathered at night time, using several recording devices, a few recordings and observations were conducted simultaneously. Audio and Video recordings were later listened to and transcribed progressively. There was no need for a translator given my fluency in English, French and other local languages spoken during group talk. French and Pidgin English texts were translated as needed while writing up the research.

From a critical realism paradigm, my positionality as a researcher, that is the way I perceive myself and the way I am perceived have implications for data collection, analysis, interpretation and writing processes (Sharan *et al.*, 2010; Choi, 2006). I am a national of Cameroon, doing research in Cameroon, within an academic and social context with which I am familiar, owing to my previous experience as an undergraduate student and to my current experience as a lecturer in another university within the same education system. These factors hold potential for biases that cannot be resolved by declaring myself either as an outsider or as an insider research situation. This is because from a cultural perspective, researchers can be insiders and outsiders to research participants at many different levels and at different times (Villenas, 1996). Banks points out that the interpretation of our life experiences

...is mediated by the interaction of a complex set of status variables, such as gender, social class, age, political affiliation, religion, and region (1998: p.5)

Maintaining a critical balance between who I am as a researcher, how I am perceived by participants, and the limits of my 'knowing' calls for critical reflexivity throughout the research process. I needed to be constantly aware that as a researcher, my past experiences, at home and abroad, contribute in framing my perceptions. The research objectives also required that I infiltrate or at least gain access to intimate learning environment that students had successfully carved out for themselves. But being aware, transparent and reflexive about them was important because the principles of validity and reliability of my research (Dunne, 2005). But first, some remarks on data analysis. Transcriptions express a fleeting social event to the researcher per categories of interest to that researcher and at a given time. In Edwards' (2003) view, the choice of convention in each instance 'depends on the nature of the interaction, the theoretical framework, and the research questions' (p.1). Conventions are often centred on the difference between 'discourse transcriptions' and 'conversation analysis.' Based on the methodological underpinnings of this research, learners' group talk lends itself to discourse but cannot be reduced to its linguistic representation. It is not a conversation in progress either. Transcription conventions adopted favours a 'content based' approach to discourse analysis, focusing not on the technicalities of grammar but on a keen observation of discourse movements reading conjunction with other non-linguistic features of group interactions. A list of essential transcription codes adopted for this research is present at the beginning of this thesis.

4.5 Data Analysis

In general, traditional processes of data analysis in an ethnographic case study research, involve organizing data, sorting and reducing them to identify the emergence of common themes and patterns that will be then interpreted and theorised "to make a coherent whole" (Cohen, 2000, p.148). However, against the backdrop of the critical realism paradigm, data analysis is far from being linear or sequential. Rather, it necessarily involves a recursive interaction between data and the process of analysis itself. Based

on Hollander (2004) and Munday's (2006) view, data collected through the methods employed in this research must be analyzed in terms of both process and content.

In terms of process, reflexivity is an important part of every stage of research, allowing data analysis to permeate every stage. There are essentially two poles of reflexivity that critical researchers must attempt to integrate and systematize in their research in form of reflections, as per Noblit (1989). There is self-reflection (that is, reflection on the researchers' bias) and reflection on the dialectical relationship between structural/historical forces and human agency in the social phenomenon observed. The latter is objective, drawing attention to the epistemological agency of the researcher, on his/her claims about objective reality and the consequences of such claims on their research. Here I let my knowledge on literature, particularly on dialogism inform my interpretations. The former is subjective in character, having to do with the researcher's 'reflexive turn' upon him/herself (Forley, 2002), involving my relationship with my research context. This is where my previous experiences as an undergraduate student in Cameroon and my current experience as a lecturer came in, both to confirm and to challenge hunches that appear in data analysis. Throughout the research I tried to be aware of both types of reflexivity and their implications on how I planned, collected, analyzed and presented research data. For Cohen *et al.* (2007), researchers

...bring their own bibliographies to the research situation and participants behave in particular ways in their presence. Reflexivity suggest that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their own selves in the research, seeking to understand their part in it, or influence on, the research (p.171).

In terms of content, I tried not to lose sight of the fact that I was using a variety tools to elucidate two main methods employed. Hence, analysis consisted in triangulating learners' discourse on subject content, their verbal affirmations about process of learning in which they are involved, and their reflexive perspectives on experiences drawn from focus group interview data. Conclusion here constituted the basis for my own in-depth analysis informed by literature and corroborated by observable non-verbal interactions amongst learners, and by my 'reflexive turn' undergirded my experience of learning both in Cameroon and abroad. The process consisted in identifying contradictions in relation to existing literature, noting hunches, and confronting new meaning derived with learners' actual experiences. Consistent with the theoretical underpinnings of this

study, in constituting learners' and researchers' perspectives, attempts will be made to go beyond the *dialectic* perspectives applied by Vygotsky (1987) which interpret differences as 'contradictions' that need to be overcome and transcended. Of greater value, will be dialogic perspectives that sees differences between voices in dialogue as constitutive of meaning such that it makes no sense to always imagine 'overcoming' these differences (Wegerif, 2008: p.347). As such, analysis itself becomes a methodological expression of the dialogic paradigms which allows for multiple voices of meaning to emerge in the understanding of social reality.

The last part of the analysis consisted in writing out analysis by paying close attention on how learners with shared understanding about intended learning outcomes strategically, position themselves within academic, social and cultural communities. It also consists in determining how, as a researcher, I make meaning out of my professional practice, and how meanings derived from this process enrich teaching and learning in similar learning contexts.

In all, data analysis in ethnographic research is usually *iterative* (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999); as a researcher, I try to make sense of what I hear and observe from the beginning of the fieldwork to inform my understanding of theories, and from generating theories I revisit subsequent data. In essence, it means to move back and forward from data collection to research design, from my initial ideas and hunches to the theoretical framework against which data is interpreted. This explains important shifts and changes that I experienced throughout data collection and analysis process. I started with a keen interest in discourse analysis as a theoretical framework, seeking ways in which language or the discourse of informal collaborative learning provides insight on how knowledge is constructed in small groups. The inadequacies and limits of verbal expressions outside of the confined structure of the classroom prompted a more dialogic understanding of learning interactions.

4.6 Ethical Issues

Ethical issues arising from the research received due consideration. Initially, every prospective participant received an information sheet on which were laid out all the necessary details about the research and about the researcher's intent. On this sheet, they

were informed that participation in the research was voluntary and non-remunerated. In order, to manage possible peer-pressure, it was made clear that the decision to participate in the research was a personal and not a collective one. As such, individual group members had the choice to participate or not to participate in the recorded group sessions. They were also told that they could withdraw from the research at any time. Furthermore, their confidentiality was guaranteed by the assurance that no personal information will be shared; interviews will be coded, and there will be nothing linking individual participation to students' performance at the university. On the element of reciprocity, it was indicated on the information sheet that the research provided participants with the opportunity to reflect on the value of collaborative learning processes at the university. Hence, it could be an opportunity to improve on the group learning activities and personal learning strategies.

Also, initially, consent forms were distributed to individual participants. Recording was meant to begin only after all participants had turned in signed copies of the consent forms. However, I soon noticed that students were reluctant to sign their names on the forms, though they pledge full participation to the research project. A number were ready and willing to do so on condition that only their initials were used. It became quickly clear that the request to sign consent forms was incongruent with the context of the research, which was an informal context of learning. Reflexively, I was also aware that culturally, signing a printed document for whatever the circumstance, necessarily formalized subsequent interactions. Nonetheless, but for random groups, this unplanned challenge was quickly overcome because participants in regular groups did not have to consent more than once. A few other students also seemed apprehensive with regards to the implications of the research on their learning and stay at the university.

To minimise the risk of involving minors in the research, very few first-year students and groups were included in the research. Distinctions pertaining to first year and second year students produced little or no significant variation to data or to research outcome. No participant was photographed or videotaped without their explicit consent.

Photographs that involve large crowds of learners or learning situations were carefully selected to respect the anonymity of those in direct focus of the camera.

4.7 Reliability

Threats to validity and reliability can never be erased completely in social research; rather the effects of these threats can be attenuated by attention to validity and reliability related issues throughout the process of preparing, collecting, and of writing (Cohen *et al.*, 2007: p.133). Internal validity requirements are reflected in the progressive and comprehensive data collection and treatment (Silverman, 2006). In general, by making explicit my theoretical and methodological assumptions, and by describing as much as I could the process of data gathering and analysis in a transparent and detailed manner, I hope to have fulfilled validity criteria of 'authenticity', 'understanding', and 'fidelity' (Cohen *et al.* 2007: p.134) within the limitations given by the research design and time availability. A few processes were taken into consideration to ensure this.

A research journal was kept throughout the research process. It was particularly useful in collecting observation data. On the field, each small group observation was recorded on a pre-established observation protocol on which I briefly noted observable facts that echoed the research questions for this study. Audio and video from session where I was not present for observation were also listened to almost immediately, described, and initially analyzed on observation protocols; making time a significant factor of reliability. These initial hunches were expanded in a bigger research diary as soon as possible with possible hypothesis for verification during subsequent field work, analysis and interpretations. Observation protocols were coded to match corresponding audio or video files. Furthermore, focus group interviews schedules were pre-tested by a group of students at a non-participant university. Their valuable feedback was integrated into the final version. Interviews were taped recorded, making it possible for the researcher to make quick descriptive notes of interactions and actions by participants that appear peculiar and relevant to the research. Careful processes, such as these do not lead to claims of certainty; nonetheless, they instill confidence in qualitative research (See. Hammersley, 1992).

Furthermore, attention was given to ‘factors that concerned the researcher directly (Cohen *et al.*, 2007: p.145) such as attitude and behavior. All along, I took time to present myself as a ‘student’ doing research and made no attempt to conceal my identity as lecturer from another university. Conscious of the effect of these factors during research, I deliberately and reflexively position myself in ways that mitigated the direct influence of my presence, attitude and behavior on participants. Like the students themselves, I was casually dressed, often in colorful clothing, in jeans and T-shirt. I tried to quickly accommodate the circumstances in which I met the students. For example, I conducted research by accommodating wherever physical conditions group of students accepted my request for an interview as illustrated below:



Space of Informal Learning 1

Photo #8: Two students and the researcher after an informal group learning activity in open air outside of school curricular, UB.

Tchoumbou-Ngantchop© (2015)

4.8 Limitations of Research

By exploring learning processes in small informal groups, this research essentially focuses on learners' agency. Whereas, as Ashwin (2010) opines, research on agentic factors in higher education discourse ought to refrain from binary constructs as if it were possible to separate agentic from structural factors. In fact, they are quintessentially linked to one another and only heuristically distinctive, just as learning practices cannot be conceived of holistically without teaching providing its corresponding antipode. Hence, any explorative study that seeks to provide an in-depth holistic reading of learners' experiences must be balanced by equally in-depth analysis on structural factors that shape and determine all agentic factors as well as learning processes. Structure-agency and teaching-learning construct and paradigm in the context of this research requires that informal collaborative learning practices be equally investigated as embodiment of teaching processes. For, learners ought to develop not just assessment related competences. They ought to be independently and collectively responsible and accountable for contribution made towards the deliberation and construction of knowledge as valued within their respective academic, social and cultural communities. Only then can informal group learning become catalysts circles for human development, and social, economic and political transformation.

4.9 Transferability

Such localized study limits the external validity of its findings and the extent of its generalization (Cohen *et al.*, 2007: p.136). Informal collaborative learning at other state universities in Cameroon might not present the same features as at the universities where this research was carried out. In qualitative research, however, it is also acknowledged that the aim of research is not to achieve 'an index of transferability,' but to provide the readers and users with a rich and careful analysis of data and a possible frame of reference for analogous situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I agree with Basse (1999) that validity is associated with a certain degree of 'fuzzy generalization'. Hence, while some of the issues raised during this research might elude generalizations, its underpinning methodology, however, might be helpful in exploring questions about

the socio-cultural implications of both formal and informal collaborative learning strategies at the tertiary level of education.

4.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have foregrounded data analysis in subsequent chapters by stating forthrightly my research the methodology underpinning data and by providing a narrative of my negotiated positionality as it evolved throughout the study. These precautions allow for the exploration of data with depth and clarity.

CHAPTER FIVE
“RUSTLING WITH ITS ANGELS”
PEDAGOGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF INFORMAL COLLABORATIVE
LEARNING

5.1 Introduction

Informal collaborative learning activities generate discourse which, examined critically, provides valuable insights into how individual learners' voices emerge within their respective groups and constitute the basis on which knowledge is perceived, constructed and applied. By so doing, learners take ownership of their university learning and position themselves within their respective academic communities. In-depth analysis of selected group talk, enriched by field notes and focus group discussions, illustrates the actual processes by which learners, in concert with their peers, make meaning out of their academic experiences and how they relate to their learning environments. Hence, this chapter and the next, present findings on student learning experiences within informal collaborative learning groups. The analysis pays attention to how learners, with shared understanding about intended learning outcomes, strategically position themselves in learning discussions to effect meaning.

A fundamental assumption in sociocultural perspectives on learning, as Mercer and Howe (2012) maintain, is that discourse is related to the context in which it is constructed, 'the nature of thinking, learning and development can only be understood by taking account of the collective, historical nature of human life' (p.12, See also Bruner, 1998; Vågan, 2011). Therefore, to determine how informal collaborative learning influences students' learning in Cameroon, there is need to closely analyse group talk as medium of meaning in the context in which it is produced.

By exploring the cognitive processes by which learners construct understandings of knowledge in group talk, this chapter aims to answer sub research questions one to three on the pedagogic value of informal collaborative learning. The next analysis chapter of

the present study investigates features of group talk that are basis for the construction of understanding in knowledge in the specific context of Cameroon. By focusing on learners' voices involved in the constructions of meaning in their contexts, chapter six also provides basis for interpretations which, as a researcher, I bring to university learners' experiences. Both chapters are intrinsically related and bring empirical evidence to Wegerif's claim (2005) that constructing understanding collaboratively is a complex experience that does not rely on a simple process, or on the discourse of logical reasoning. It necessarily requires a space where real voices clash, generating new meanings, and in this process shape identities.

5.2 The Pedagogic Relevance of Informal Collaborative Learning

Utterances by themselves are without meaning. In fact, every word in use is socially located. Words derive their meaning through the individual learner's agency of voice involved in making important choices based on the given context in which words are uttered. Analysis in this chapter consists in investigating university learner' voices as basis for an in-depth understanding of how learners construct their understanding of disciplinary knowledge.

5.2.1 The Agency of the Learner's Voice

From a sociolinguistic perspective, meaning is derived from social conventions that words accrue over historic time (Gee, 1999), over discursive time (Mercer, 2008; 2009) or situated time (Lefstein & Snell, 2014). These studies assume that meanings of words are inherited, not generated (Gee, 1999). From a dialogic perspective, meanings are generated because learners allow their voices to emerge conditioned by historical features, which ensure that words or actions uttered in a particular place and at a particular time will have a different meaning than they would under other conditions (Holoquist, 2006; Park-Fuller, 2009).

5.2.1.1 The Individual Learner's Agency of Voice

An individual learner's voice in its openness to the 'an-other' provides the basic fabric of meaning in talk. Voices are reflected in the utterances by which group talk are constituted. Evelyn, Delphine and Aury discuss 'soil classification' as part of a lesson in Agriculture, using Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) approach. The segment opens as follows:

1. **Evelyn:** (reading) Why do you classify soils? 2 marks
2. **Delphine:** We classify soil to know the method of formation of the soil (...) To know the observed properties such as...

(UBv2) Year Two Students in Agriculture, 15th March 2015, segment 22:41pm

At first view, it echoes rote learning, the memorisation technic based on repetition (Schunk, 2008). A closer examination of the content and surrounding circumstances of the exercise reveals a different approach to learning, which seems to accommodate better the cognitive, social and cultural complexities involved in the basic act of repeating voicing propositional knowledge. Considering that Delphine's utterance in line 2 is a deliberate response to an initiated task, it lends itself to analysis not just as an objective response but also, and more importantly, as a resonance of Delphine's voice. Her voice is more than the phonic expression of her mind; it refers to that which is most uniquely Delphine, which can be heuristically reconstituted through the analysis of her utterances. Her use of the deictic pronoun 'we,' for example, can be taken as the outcome of an implied reflexive process which involves the actualisation of herself in what initially appeared to be a reified propositional knowledge. At least three meaningful possibilities could be inferred:

We: potentially refers to:

- (i) herself as responder to the task initiated in 1 – 'why do you classify soil?'
- (ii) herself as part of the collective or 'learner' category. It means that she positions herself within the teacher-learner binary here as 'learner.'
- (iii) Delphine's self-positioning as a member of an academic community. She identifies with the authoritative voice of a specific academic community by ventriloquizing already established understanding of soil classification there might be.

Each of these three provides the possibility for Delphine to actualise herself differently. They represent three possible options opened to Delphine's voice. Her utterance only becomes clearer and emerges as she draws further from other choices and possibilities undergirding her potential voice. This includes the way she positions herself in relation to her peers, and all other implied voices, to her previous knowledge and learning experiences. Her overall voice in discussion with her peers, emerges at the helm of several layers of other possibilities, shaped by contingent factors that would have given her voice a different meaning under other conditions (Holoquist, 2006) (see Appendix 5.1 for an expanded text and analysis of Delphine's discursive role. Thus, as shown in the diagram below (Fig. 3) Delphine's voice embodies the multiple voices implied in her utterances.

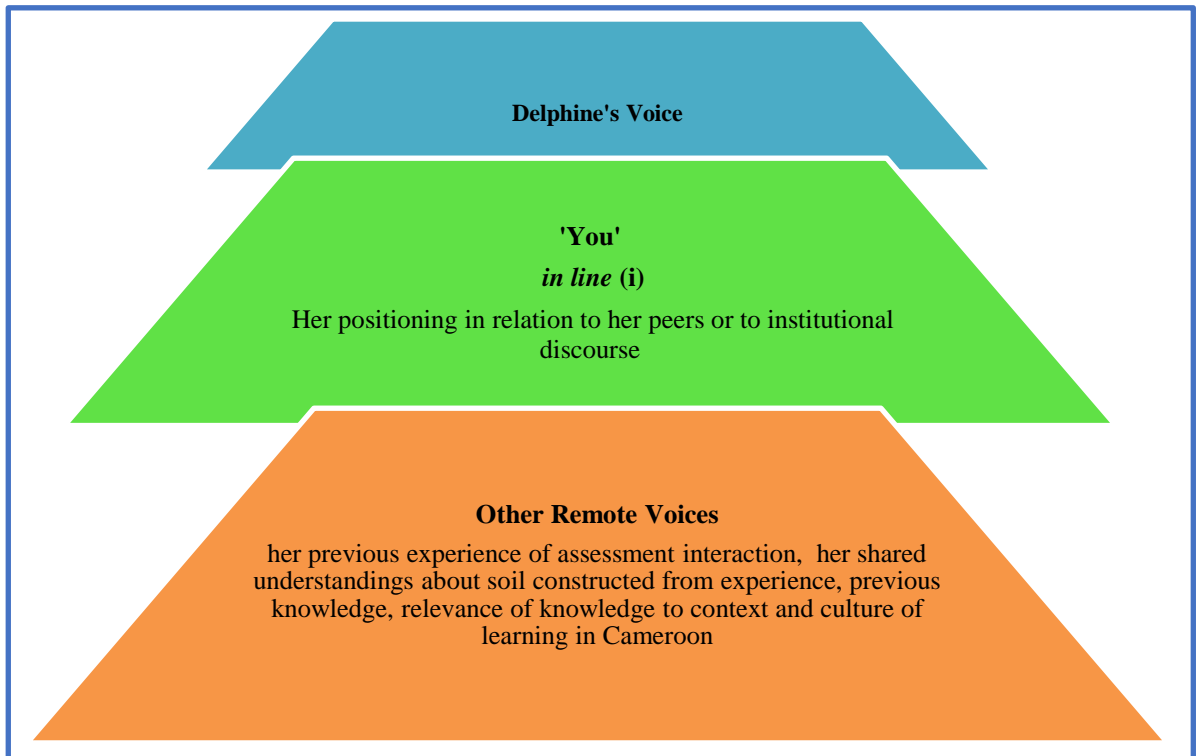


Figure 3: Embodiment of Voice

So, Delphine's emerging voice is framed and made possible by several other voices overlying each other at that particular instance of her speech. Her voice is essentially polyphonic, in the Bakhtinian sense; for Delphine, understanding on *soil fertility* is constructed by the choices that she makes in favour of a specific meaning which she wishes to convey through her voice and her choices are made possible because each voice is

opened to ‘an-other.’ This understanding is based on Bakhtin’s (1986) claim that the alternating character of discourse expresses a complex social process involving the overlapping of different ‘speech genres.’

Vanessa is a second-year student in the school of Agriculture in one of the English-speaking universities. In the segment below, she is trying to construct her understanding of ‘second generation bio-fuels.’ A coincidental coordination of her body language and utterances as captured by a segment of video recording seems vividly illustrates her multiple-layered ‘voices.’ Raising her eyes from her note book, she tells her peers:

(i) *Please let me try to explain so that it can also enter my brain [...]*

She quickly stands up from her sitting position on the floor mattress. She steps backward into an available open space, rubbing her forehead with her right hand, and then says,

(ii) *Then I say...*

Turning to her peers and with a more confident voice:

(iii) *The second-generation biochemical biofuel produces afforous fuel such as the cellulous ethanol and the cellulous bio-lithanol’*

UBv2 Second Year Students in Agriculture. Video recorded on 01st March 2015, 30:03 minutes onward

All utterances are not accompanied by body language in group talk, but coincidentally, Vanessa’s physical movement indicate at least three main levels of voice present in her utterance.

At the first level, Vanessa takes a bird’s-eye view of her own cognition and of knowledge itself, of how she comes to knowledge – by ‘trying to explain *it*’ (*it* referring to discipline knowledge). This corresponds to her body movement of distancing herself from her lecture notes, which as she says ‘...can also enter her head.’ This movement and voice level correspond to Wortham and Locher’s (1996; p.563) claim that the voice has the capacity of positioning itself outside of discourse, as a form of ‘meta-voice.’

At the second level, Vanessa’s position moves to a voice which ventriloquises her own voice – her cognitive awareness of her own saying, corresponding to the pensive bodily attitude or rubbing her forehead thoughtfully.

Then the third level, she moves from her awareness to her own cognition to adopt a normal voice, which simultaneously doubles as the voice of disciplinary knowledge. In Bakhtinian term, in her normal voice she ventriloquises disciplinary knowledge on ‘the second generational biochemical...’ Vanessa’s utterance shows that a voice is never static, complete, or fixed. The learner’s voice is always ‘becoming’ in as much as within the same utterance it allows for multiple representations and positioning.

Gee (1999), from a psychosocial perspective, also talks about the social function of language (see also Halliday, 1993) focusing on the different established categorisations in learning discourse; categorisations by which meanings are derived. Based on his understanding, analysing students’ group talk in Cameroon consists in exploring the complex relationship between their ‘primary discourses’ which all learners develop by being part of a small family and community, and ‘the secondary discourse’ of the university transmitted through university practices. For, Gee (1999) sees learning discourse as a linguistic construct made possible by the interaction between learners’ ‘primary Discourses’, and their ‘secondary discourse’.

Dialogism, contrastingly, though not initially developed by Bakhtin as coherent system or method of research in understanding group talk, allows learners’ voices, rather than fixed social categories, to provide the basis for knowledge, meanings and identities as generated in context. A few Bakhtinian terms, put together describe the process through which voices generate meaning. Firstly, the concept of *internally persuasive discourse*, which represents the ever decentralising, expansive and dynamic aspect of speech, often seeking assimilation into the speakers own voice. The is strong antipathy between internally persuasive discourse and *official monologic discourse*, which represents the centralising, institutional aspects of the voice, often resistant internally persuasive discourse (Bakhtin, 1984).

Wells, (2014) observes that learning can be conceived of as occurring within a monologic-internally persuasive continuum in dialogic tension with one another, and with far reaching implications on how knowledge is conceptualised and constructed. Internally persuasive and monologic discourse represent two active forces which makes the

learners' voice both expansive and loyal; 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal.' *Centripetal* forces, on the one hand, seek to unify, standardise and centralise language around what is known and established. They attempt to silence the unconventional and the uncontrolled discourse by denying them existence. On the other hand, *centrifugal* forces can be associated to the internally-persuasive discourse as it seeks to undo and challenge unifying forces (Bakhtin, 1984: p.100) and with it all authoritative and monologic preferences.

Secondly, still from a Bakhtinian perspective, it is through the single voice of the speaker, as in a 'speech genre,' that different overlying voices generate meanings that are relevant to learners. For Wortham and Locher (1996), it is because speakers can 'voice' and 'ventriloquise,' that even the most apparently neutral discourses can be laden with implied meanings, understandings and judgments, based on speakers' language choices, whether intentional or non-intentional. Analysis below shows how learners' voices are positioned in group talk, and influence learners' construction of understanding of knowledge within their specific context of higher education learning in Cameroon universities. Within this perspective, contexts are not external to the voices that create them. For, voices, like speech genres, 'echo' other voices, roles and institutions; in other words, the specific context of understanding that had previously influenced – without possessing – the multiple voices by which the speaker's voice emerges, and that other speakers might subsequently ventriloquise and expand through their own voices (Bakhtin, 1981; p.299). As such, voices are not merely subjected to their related context. Rather they emerge and develop through interactive dialogues between people and their contexts.

Robert is a third-year student in sociology. I use his extended speech on Immanuel Wallerstein '*system theory*' to illustrate how the learner's primary voice interact with his secondary voice to construct understanding of the disciplinary knowledge that is relevant for him and for his peers. The full discourse presents an iterative between the voice that is his own, his primary voice, and the secondary voice which is the voice of disciplinary ideas. It is also a movement between his personalised perspective on knowledge – 'we,' 'us,' and 'they' and the reification of disciplinary knowledge.

While Robert ventriloquises Wallestein's theory, he illustrated, using concrete de-colonising examples, the relevance of knowledge about Wallenstein in a postcolonial context. I have italicised keys words of personification of discourse ('we', 'they', 'us') emphasizes are Robert's.

Robert's Primary Voice

2. Most of the time it is based on exploitation.
- 4 Now, just like during colonisation, when the west came, when the European were coming down to colonise even though at times they were coming as missionaries, *they* were coming to civilise us...the truth is that *they* wanted one thing; they wanted our raw material. So, when they came here they had to settle around the coastal area. This simply means that they will build... bring development or when they go to the interior *they* will exploit resources, bring them to the semi-periphery, process them now and send it to their country. Despite the fact that they were coming to develop but *they* had negative aim...*they* wanted to exploit. Today we even talk of...
- 6 =that is, *we* don't even have complete independence. Of course, this *they* have designed various means to still try to control (...) *they* have to exploit...

Robert's Secondary Voice

1. There is also that of Immanuel Wallerstein who talks of the world system theory, that is change can occur due to political, economic, social or whatever decisions towards one country or another. These decisions can be based on partnership.
- 3 He was saying that there is a core; there is a semi-periphery and there is a periphery... The core, developed nation...that the core exists because of periphery.
5. neo-colonialism;
7. So that is how Immanuel Wallenstein was looking at it.
8. So in a nutshell what we are saying that among the conflict of social change there is Karl Marx and we also had

that of Immanuel Wallenstein.

A discourse which begins as a mere statement of disciplinary knowledge (1) is quickly dominated Robert's primary voice as it emerges and then dominates his secondary voice without departing from it. In his speech, his voice finds a space which would have been unlike in another context. The voice of the speaker is shielded and draws meaning from representations of the multi-layered contexts imbedded in each utterance, and readily accessible to learners at the time of their speech.

Based on the initial excerpt, Delphine's utterance can thus be represented as the epicentre of several layers of contexts and voices by which her voice on *soil classification* is framed and brought into existence thanks to its radical openness to other voices or to its internally persuasive self. Thus, can be illustrated as follows:

Delphine: We classify soil to know the method of formation of the soil (...) To know the observed properties such as...

The *deictic pronouns* 'we' - line 2, set against 'you' in line 1 of the transcript quoted earlier, distinguishes the context of response from the context of initiated task in Delphine's interaction with Evelyn. So, in relation to the rest of talk, both contexts 'a' and 'b' can be said to sit within a wider context which pertains to the routine of task initiation and response. The routine of task initiation and response in the group also implies foundational practices in learning; and foundational practices in turn are related to early assessment practices. Early assessment practices and pedagogies are related to the wider context of assessment practices in Cameroon schools and universities; and ultimately to expectations and implications of assessment practices in the lives and future of learners.

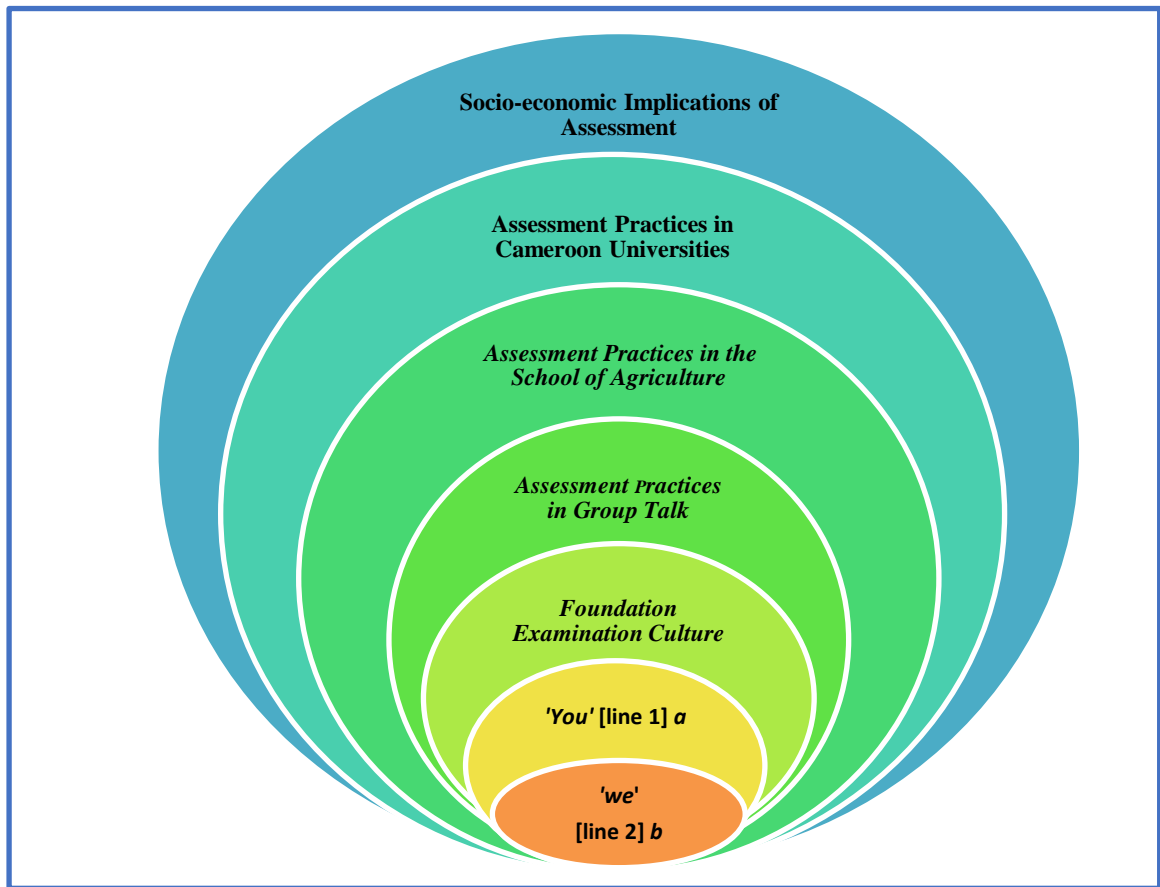


Figure 4: Contextual Embodiment of Voice

Through dialogue, clashing voices allow new voices to emerge, bearing new meanings. In other words, learning in the informal space is possible because through emerging voices, learners strategically position themselves in the informal, collaborative discourse as a way of fomenting, generating and constructing understanding of meanings. Group talk expresses learners' voices, through which meanings are constructed. The space of informal learning, free from the dialectic structure of the classroom and of institutions, allows for the exploration of learners' voices within the multiple contexts from which they emerge.

5.2.1.2 Collective Agency of Voice

Just as a learner's individual voice emerges from a polyphony of voices, by which meanings are constructed and expressed in utterances, individual learners through their voices, are engaged in constructive dialogue with their peers. As such, shared meanings as derived from group talk, are partly outcomes of specific choices that individual learners make in their continuous quest for meaning. Learners' voices overlap each other in

group talk, in their collective eagerness to actualise themselves as part of emerging meanings. Below, Belinda and Berry are involved in a dialogue in which they mutually complete each other's sentences through spontaneous interruptions marked by [...]

Belinda: [That means: when you (.)] you (.) you (.) plant, you use like say 95 percent *of the crop* to do the bio-fuel

Berry: [*of the crops* (.) yes.] Not like the other one that you use the (.) *you use the seed* and (.) yes

Belinda: [*you use the seeds*] and throw the chaff.

CUa3 Junior Year Students in School of Agriculture, 13th January 2015, 4:45pm, segment 43:39 onward.

In each instance of interruption, the interrupted expression is repeated and then further expanded until the subsequent interruption and expansion. This form of talk lends itself to exploratory talk (Alexander, 2008; Barnes 2008), by which learners, through the guidance of a teacher, seek to collectively construct meaning. From a Vygotskian perspective, exploratory talk is an intersubjective endeavour through which meaning is 'scaffolded' by several learners under the guidance of a teacher or a more knowledgeable peer (Vygotsky, 1978). Outside the institutional space of learning, informal group talk is framed by the endless possibilities that informal space offers learners' voices. Unlike the 'dialectic' understanding of dialogue which seeks identification as grounds for meaning, Wegerif affirms in the dialogic perspective, the 'difference between voices in dialogue is constitutive of meaning in such a way that it makes no sense to imagine 'overcoming' this difference' (2008: p.347).

In addition, openness to 'an-other' is not limited to voice; it also involves the different discursive roles that learners often assume in the process of constructing understanding of knowledge. The segment of data below involves three students Alvine, Deleq and Beleck, in studying psychology, swap different roles in the task-initiation-and-response teaching-learning paradigm:

1. **Initiation:** **Alvine:** ((Suddenly)) Deleq, define African psychopathology
2. **Response:** **Deleq:** alright...
3. **Initiation:** **Beleck:** start by defining 'Psychopathology'
4. **Response:** **Deleq:** (2) Psychopathology i-s t-h-e study of sufferings (2) ((groan

slightly)). It is the study of. It is the study of psychological sufferings

5. Response: **Alvine**: ((speaking softly)) The science which studies psychological suffering.
6. Response: **Deleq**: ((repeats loudly)) The science which studies psychological suffering.
7. Response: **Beleck**: [and the treatment]
8. Response: **Deleq**: No, psychopathology has nothing to do with treatment.

UDa3 Third Year Students in Psychology, 30th March 2015 audio
recording segment 15:46 minutes onward

In the opening lines 1 above, Alvine is not a teacher, yet she initiates a task abruptly and uses an authoritative imperative to her peer: ‘define...’- perhaps in a move to stimulate a learning situation like the way teachers initiate tasks in formal classrooms. Also, it appears she is not any more knowledgeable than Deleq from whom she expects a response. In context, Alvine takes the licence to play the role of a task initiator without having to maintain this role throughout the discussion. Deleq, on his part, initially plays the role of a learner. However, as the discussion develops, both learners move in and out of different roles, also giving room to Beleck to step in, adopting one or the other. As such, the learning discourse is made possible by the different roles that speakers chose to play at strategic moments while talking.

Task initiation-and-response are characteristic features of formal classroom, built on the relationship between the teacher and the learner (Alexander, 2008; Hardman, 2008). But from a dialogic perspective, open group talk provides each learner with the possibility to voice, to ventriloquise, and transcend their initial voices and other implied voices using emerging voices, until the speaker embodies a convenient voice, albeit provisionally. By trying different roles and voices in discourse, Deleq, Alvine and Beleck each gain insight, enriched by multiple perspectives and approaches in the definition of *African Psychopathology*. I find Bakhtin’s *Carnivalesque* (1987) a useful construct in accessing and understanding the discursive function of the different roles and voices performed by learners during group talk. The informal space of group talk is the space of the ‘carnival;’ the ‘dialogic space’ (White, 2008), where learners’ agency of voice emerges not just as part of the learning process, but as learning itself. As in a medieval *carnival*, learners take on different roles at different times, depending on the voice and that they wish to ventriloquize as a means of enhancing their voices

and understandings. These roles allow them to assume and try out different voices and meanings.

In the collective use of their voices, learners also obtain the licence to expand and test authoritative and propositional taken-for-granted assumptions of the classroom. The segment of data depicts six students contributing randomly to a physics problem that had been laid out on the chalkboard. A discussion that started calmly had turned into a heated debate when suddenly it became obvious that the expected solution to the physics problem was not feasible. In reviewing the physics problem, it was brought to the attention of all, that Africa, one of the students, had surreptitiously introduced another variable into the physics equation when she wrote it on the chalkboard, in a bid to challenge her peers and to test the scientific equation the teacher had given in class. Her action led to this dialogue:

1. **Roland:** The problem is that nah...what you applied to other questions cannot be applied to the question here. The situation here is different...
2. **Anu:** [I See, she] ((Pointing at Africa, another student of the group)) has given us...she gave me but a wrong thing which is not zero...
3. **Africa:** ((long laughter))
4. **Bih:** Oka...Africa, seriously nah, you are supposed to be careful
5. **Africa:** ((laughter))
6. **Anu:** [And she is very excited]. Africa, you are such a delinquent (.) Why did you do that?
7. **Roland:** [That is why I took time to get to this point in solving the problem...it is very different] All this time wasted we could have solved another question (2)

UB3 Physics Level 400 session on *Electromagnetism II* (segment 10 mins 14 seconds onward) 15th March 2015

With the aim of testing and expanding already established scientific knowledge, Africa did not hesitate to ‘uncrown’ both the epistemic certainty of her peers and the scientific authority of the physics equation they had been working on. Interestingly, nonetheless, after an initial reprimand, the peers decide to carry on with the hypothetical equation as altered and, by so doing, they validate her temporarily absurd, or carnivalesque position in discourse as a way of exploring meaning.

From the above, it can be established that group talk allows learners to engage in a dialogic expansion of meanings and of understandings, owing to the possibilities of the multiple roles and voices that each group activity offers. This becomes a viable learning process for students involved.

In all, based on the analysis of the learner's voice in this section, I argue that no utterance in group talk is neutral or insignificant. Rather, through the process of voicing and ventriloquizing, they acquire meaning when they are uttered. And meaning is enhanced as learners stretch their voices or the different roles that they ventriloquize beyond the 'real' or actual circumstances of discourse. For just as learners' voices can relate to previous knowledge, they are also capable of positioning themselves hypothetically in dialogue, by anticipating voices that belong to them or to other implied roles. So, every opportunity to talk adds value to the knowledge acquired; for talk allows for the embodiment of 'different voices'. Also, meanings exist in the '*in-between-ness*' of successive utterances, and are conditioned by contingent factors which ensure that words or actions uttered in that place and at that time will have a different meaning than they would under any other conditions (Holoquist, 2006: p.428; Park-Fuller, 2009). This explains why speakers often vacillate between voices -as above, that is between different roles in speech -, and move quickly from one speaker to another,

Delphine: ...then I say the starting material use...

To complete sentences:

Aureole: [Cellulosic Ethanol]

To clarify meaning of concepts used:

Delphine: The starting material used...

To amplify:

Delphine: ...it is the cellulous...the Litmus-cellulous

To expand

Delphine: Then I say...There are four steps involved in the production of this.

It is also possible that to have the same speaker fulfilling different function or role playing different voice in the same speech (See Appendix 5.2 with further example).

Apart from dialogue, group talk can also be represented by vivid illustrations of long moments of silence (Photo #9), which cannot be captured and presented otherwise. As much as learners sit together and talk, they also accommodate long periods of silent exchanges and whispering, but with more discrete movements around tables, and more personalised interactions.



Photo #9: A male student standing over the right shoulder of a female student receiving assistance on a problem he had brought over from his silent study space, while another student observes passively. In the background, another student studies quietly. rCUIB2 – School of Engineering

Tchoumbou-Ngantchop© (2015)

Informal Learning 4

Occasionally, one student crosses over the desk to talk to another student briefly, focusing on a piece of paper, comparing personal notes and worked out solutions. Also, featuring in the data are other extended moments of unplanned silence among members of the same group. For example, George is part of group that has integrated individual study time into group talk through extended periods of silence in between group talk sessions. Group activity often began with a collective decision on what the daily targets were. With this collective decision in mind, the group broke up with each learner moving to a corner of a classroom where they studied privately. Asked in focused group

interview why they viewed such exercises as group learning instead of private studies, George explained in a way that hints on the significance of such moments for learners:

Actually, for us it is group study we are doing. When I sit behind and see my friends busy, I feel motivated to persevere. I write down things that I do not understand. At the right moment, I go up to someone to ask or I bring it to the group for discussion on our way home [...] we are separate but we are together

UB3 (Level 400 Accounting student) in focus group interview,
16th January, 2015

Moments of silence, when learners ‘sit,’ ‘see...friends busy,’ ‘write down’ for subsequent discussion in the group and *sacred* moments of individual engagement are creative moments when learners personally appropriate strategies used in dialogue with others is described by Wegerif, (2005) in research on students’ classroom interaction. In addition, research conducted in Mexico on individual learning, coordinated with collaborative social activities, has been established as beneficial to individual students’ performance (Mercer *et al.*, 1999; Wegerif *et al.*, 1999). The same conclusion can apply in higher education learning, hinging on Vygotsky’s claim, that ‘all that is internal in the higher mental functions was at one time external’ (1991: p.36). In other words, the ability to perform cognitive tasks when acting alone stems from a prior or proleptic socialisation processes when the same or similar tasks were performed with the help of others. Hence, in groups, even silent, cognitive activity amid peers becomes a strategic dialogic possibility: other voices are involved as learners strategically position themselves in search of their own voices.

Nevertheless, in the context of this study of Cameroonian higher education students, it is usually in relation to concrete assessment demands that learners position themselves and their voices within small learning groups. The next subsection focuses on university learners’ voices as they construct their understanding of meaning within the Cameroonian educational context.

5.2.2 Assessment and Informal Collaborative Learning

Participants tend to articulate the academic benefits of coming together to learn in relation to assessment. This can be in terms of the immediate circumstances leading up to

group activity or in terms of the return benefit of informal, collaborative learning to individual learners. As Kasina, a level 300 learner explains:

There are constant groups...where we read separately but at the eve of the exams...come and see us answering past questions from everywhere. 'You don't know this one, I explain. I don't know this one, she explains...

But some (group activities) cannot be planned...you see somebody answering a question. One person comes and adds; another person comes and adds, already forming a group. They will finish one question when nobody planned...

UB2 (level 300 student in Agriculture) focus group 12th March 2015

Motivations for group learning are higher during periods set aside by the institution for students to prepare and to sit for their end of semester examinations. The same learner explains:

Last semester we planned that as we are coming this second semester we will be meeting every day. We must keep reading. We planned it that way but we kept carrying it forward. Human beings are funny. We only realise we have to come together when there is pressure of exams; exams add pressure.

UB2 (level 300 student in Agriculture) focus group 12th March 2015

In fact, assessment has been shown to have a strong impact on learning (Tambo, 2003; Gulikers *et al.*, 2008). Summative assessment is the overarching mantra that frames learning, and seems to affect the *when*, *how* and *for what purpose* learners engage in informal collaborative learning.

5.2.2.1. Summative Assessment and Informal Collaborative Learning

Summative assessment is understood as the evaluation of student learning at the end of an instructional unit against a particular criterion initially established (Pryor & Akwesi 1998; Black & Wiliam, 1999). While informal, collaborative learning activities are not summative assessment exercises proper, they are partly shaped and directly influenced by the summative assessment practices of the classroom. In terms of structure, informal, collaborative learning activities often take the form of either direct or implied questions and answers, which are intended to proleptically actualise summative assessment situations. The dialogue below typifies the use of summative assessment material in an informal group learning activity.

Evelyn: Let's go to the next question (.) Question number three

Delphine: [((exclaiming)) Me::rde!] This question is ha::rd

Evelyn: Delphine, you give your own introduction sentence

Delphine: As for me, I will start by saying... (2)

Aury: [You did not need to start there]

UB2 (Level 300 Agriculture students) Recorded 01st March 2015

A question is implied in Evelyn's opening statement. '*Question number three*' refers to document or a learning support available to the group, where a series of questions are laid out on subject content. In most instances, nonetheless, the question is read out loud, including assessment instructions and the grading scale attributed to it. Participant Delphine's initial interjection - [((exclaiming)) Me::rde!] *This question is ha::rd* ('challenging'), means that she cannot promptly make sense of the task and what is expected of her. Group talk aims at helping her perceive the expected learning outcomes through the process of voicing.

Discussion begins amongst peers when they mutually invite each other to voice responses to the question asked. For example,

Delphine, you give your introduction sentence

is clearly an invitation to the learner, Delphine, to voice a contribution that reflects her own understanding of knowledge. So, in these students' view, learning would be achieved once Delphine can respond, as she would, to a real examination situation. This means that the entire process of learning is largely determined by summative assessment demands. Progress is achieved when each learner, either directly or by association with peers, successfully overcomes their doubts on their proleptic ability to respond to summative examination questions and settings.

Group activity generally consists in repeating cycles of *question-answer-collective-feedback* as often as required, each time refocusing the discussions on specific tasks that have been identified by the group as relevant to their learning. During a thirty-eight minutes recording sessions with UB2 students, about six attempts were made by group

members at different intervals to refocus discussions on the perceived assessment demands²

In small learning groups, interaction based on previous summative assessment tasks show that learners are more likely to engage with course contents to the extent by which they approximate past examination questions and their assessment benchmarks. Therefore, in UB2 above, when Delphine says ‘*as for me, I will start by saying...*’ it can be assumed that she is attempting to construct knowledge on a subject, based on her understanding of the task.

The influence of assessment on learning cannot be overemphasized (Tambo, 2006). However, as Black and Wiliam (1999: p.2) suggest, the value of any form of assessment should depend on its ability to improve students’ learning. Transcripts of focus group interviews show that most individual participants have different understandings and make different usage of proleptic assessment opportunities. As, Agbor, one learner articulates different learning attitudes in his group:

Agbor: Learning depends on the students that are in the group.

Because these girls, particularly...these people (.)

[pointing at empty sitting positions that were occupied by other participants during the just ended study session]

...they don’t want to read and understand.

They just want that you should tell them what they should go and write (*examinations*) and pass, and forget about the course...it is a shame...

Reflecting on better learning attitudes, the same student affirms:

...that is why I always tell them that I will not come and explain a question in ways that you will just come and go and write [*the examination or test*]. But, you come. We discuss. We share ideas. Then we each go for the exams individually.

² Field note UB2, Department of Agriculture, #51, observed 01st March 2015

UB3 (Level 400 Sociology and Anthropology student) Focus group interview 16th March 2015

In this participant's view, and as implied across the data, learning in informal groups cannot, and should not, be reduced to the enabling individual learners to decipher and answer past examination questions in view of upcoming examinations. For, as specific as they can be, summative assessment tasks are means by which individual and collective learner's voices are drawn into a wider and deeper dialogue with each other on how to best construct understanding of discipline knowledge.

Observational data from the present study shows that each question and answer treated in the context of informal group learning, though framed by the limiting language of examination, is also capable of stimulating and accelerating learning beyond the perceived assessment demands. Consequently, while summative assessment remains an important framework and the motivation for informal group learning in Cameroon universities, data must be ploughed further to identify possible areas of opportunities that summative assessment bring to learning. I identify four interrelated ways by which assessments seems to influence learning in different groups:

- i. through 'game playing'
- ii. through formative assessment processes
- iii. through metacognition
- iv. and through critical thinking

From a dialogic perspective, all four imply a deep and critical engagement with learning, involving both discipline knowledge and summative assessment procedures by which learners' understanding and knowledge can be assessed and validated.

5.2.2.2 'Strategic Learning' and the Agency of Voice

In group talk discussions, learners seem to attribute a considerable amount of time to discussing assessment procedures and processes related to course contents. Exchanging ideas on the amount of detail needed in responding to a past examination question, level 3 students in *Research Methods* focused on learning expectations, as related to course instructors:

Ewokolo: See, you have to read these lectures differently. In the last assignment, we included ideas from *Yankou's* notes into the assignment that was given to us. Our papers came back with the remark that 'Read! Forget *Yankou*'

(Meaning: *focus on what your textbook says. Do not be fixated on what Yankou gave you as definition*)

Eposi: [Who wrote that?] *Tayou*? He will not be the one assessing the course. Since it is the final examination, the main lecture will obviously get involved [*Yankou*]. It means that you have to be careful how you use words...

Ewokolo: What if they present an examination sheet with part A and part B, as they did recently, requiring that we respond on two separate sheets of papers.

CUa3 Year Three Students in School of Business, 23 February 2015, segment 23 mins

How learners perceive specific tasks necessarily influences the way that they learn. The learners above have different understandings of the task, depending on the particular lecturer who will be involved in assessing their work. Discussion is centred, not on knowledge itself, but on the difference in students' perceptions of assessment demands.

Previous research suggests that, students are more often involved in a selective process in learning, which to a large extent, is determined by learners' perception of assessment demands (Guliker *et al.*, 2008). This is because, seemingly, through learning interactions, students relate to knowledge based on perceived assessment demands, which are often constructed and shared in the process of learning itself. Hence, through 'strategic learning,' informal group interactions make it possible for learners to develop appropriate discourses on discipline knowledge. In UBa2 above, Evelyn says:

Delphine, you give your own introduction sentence.

The subtext seems to be that Evelyn is expecting Delphine, her peer, to articulate basic subject content from her own understanding, an approximation of the examination discourse as related to the given task.

However, more than just a behavioural reproduction of content related material, Delphine's self-emphatic response – '*as for me, I will start by saying*' – draws attention to her reflexive voicing. As such, her utterance is more than repetition of authoritative knowledge handed to her in the classroom. It is an expression of her voice, constructed by her understanding of what might best meet assessment demands; how she perceives

them and how such perceptions relate to those of the group. Complex learning processes are involved, related to Delphine's critical engagement with the course material and learning contexts. There are a few clues in the data which indicate how learners 'play the game' of interpreting and translating specific tasks into discursive approximations of assessment expectations.

Firstly, often the entire learning process is largely guided by a pre-determined grading scale, presented in numeric values and attributed to specific *tasks* (*Appendix# for sample assessment questions used as basis for group talk*). Data below shows how grading criteria of summative assessment might condition the extent to which learners interpret and explore subject content.

1. **Agor:** Look at question four [*reading from his sheet of paper*], conflict theories complement the evolutionary theory.
2. **Ojong:** *Conflict theory complement* (3) we first define each theory. Right?
3. **Agor:** Look at the mark that is there
4. **Prince:** Twenty marks! I suppose you just look at the different theories and talk about four different ones...or how many should one give in this case?

UB3 (Level 400 Sociology and Anthropology student) 16th March 2015

Prince's ability in line 4 to estimate how much information is required to earn a mark or grade becomes a determining factor in how understanding of knowledge in a task is perceived and constructed.

Secondly, meaning generated in discourse is also framed by learners' perceptions of specific institutional policies, practices, changes and their expected attainment outcomes. Students are sometimes drawn to strategic planning, based on such anticipated outcomes. Prudence is a student in the school of social and management sciences (UB3). Interacting with her peers, she deliberated on how much reading was required for a course based on the simple fact that one of the two teachers who used to teach the course had been moved.

Prudence: I said, I believe the setting (of the examinations questions) will change this year [...] because last year she

Ayuk (*Name of lecture*) was teaching this course with the help of another lecturer...this year she is teaching it alone. So the setting will change...she cannot give herself more work than she can handle. We are more than four hundred in that course. Expect questions different from ones that came (in the examination) last year, and expect questions that require shorter answers.

rUBa3 (Level 400 literature student) in focus group interview, 12th January, 2015

Sam is involved in the game of approximation, based on his perception of institutional circumstances as related to assessment. The fact that this year the lecturer of the course is 'teaching it alone' makes all the difference in how he engages in learning.

Learners' ability to construct and sustain discourses on course content, based on summative assessment procedures, allow for the exploration of learning as a collective effort, by which learners position themselves and their voices within the assessment practices of their respective institutions. While this has the effect of limiting learners' engagement with the task itself and with what constitutes knowledge, it shows learners' ability to engage with course material through a more critical process, involving the immediate and wider university culture and context of learning.

5.2.2.3 Formative Assessment and Informal Collaborative Learning

The exploratory, provisional and provocative nature of informal interactions provides learners with the licence to explore, provoke and arouse different ideas and possibilities than might be opened by the specific task being addressed (Crossouard & Pryor, 2008: p.5). The segment below presents a brief conversation between Agbor and Estel carried out in the presents of other members of their group. It shows how group talk could be used in construct each other's understanding on a subject, guided by a formative uses of questions and answers:

Agbor: Please talk *nah!* (.) We know that the conflict theories are trying to explain change as a result of conflict. The evolutionary theories are trying to explain change as a result of the origin and progress of the society and they believe that progress is uni-directional.

Estel: Conflict theory and Evolutionary theory. They actually complement? When

you analyse nah, you just talk about the two theories and say they actually lead to change...

Agbor: [do you know the meaning of complement?] They complement, why? This is how I understand the question...

UB3 (Level 400 Sociology and Anthropology student) Focus group interview 16th March 2015

In this segment, Agbor engages Estel through specific opened questions. The first question, allows for the exploration of knowledge on *conflict theories* and evolutionary theories giving Interactions highlight the pedagogic function of assessment. The full dialogue shows how he scaffolds her understanding (See Appendix 5.3 for further analysis), each time giving her the possibility of testing herself understand on the knowledge discussed.

Crossouard and Pryor (2008) distinguish between the summative function of assessment and its formative functions within learning interaction. For, in assessing learners, teachers seek to explore not only *if* learners know but also *what* they know. However, from an intersubjective dialectic approach to learning, the teacher is not involved in group talk as formative assessment assumes, but the distinction is important in exploring students' knowledge with purpose of generating feedback on performances as a way of improving and accelerating perceived learning expectations (Sadler, 1998), which is the essence of formative assessment. While the role of a teacher is important in validating convergent and divergent understandings of knowledge within the classroom, the inner dynamic of group talk itself allows for interactions among learners which are no longer productions of the teacher's conscious intentions.

Building from the work of Vygotsky Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (1978; 1987), Mercer (2000) develops and theorises 'Intermental Development Zone' (IDZ) as an interpersonal communicative aid to learning. With Bakhtinian underpinnings, Mercer's analytical tool of group talk seeks to account for the rather exploratory character of teacher-learner classroom interaction. Extending Mercer's Intermental Development Zone into the study of collaborative classroom talk in the UK, Fernandez *et al.* (2001: p.53) conceive of a 'symmetrical' space in learning in which 'language is used in a dynamic and dialogical way to maintain and develop a shared context.' Involving more mature learners, this can be viewed as a self-sustaining space which allows learners in

constructing their understanding of knowledge to explore both the possibility of knowing and *what* they know. This space can be sustained through learner's voice. Unlike in Vygotsky's ZPD which recognises the role that a more knowledgeable peer can play in the scaffolding knowledge, the peer in the dialogic space is one who is willing to lend his or her voice at any time as a way of framing emerging meanings. I use another segment involving more than two learners to show how at different times, learners, even without being teachers, or without claim of more knowledge, assist each other in exploring understandings. Mildred, Valerine and Gwen are first year students in the school of Agriculture in (CUa3). The topic of discussion is Blanket Fertiliser Application. Note that almost every utterance comes about briskly in the form of prosodic interruption. Meaning that there no voice of authority involved. But together they are in a collect search for meaning. Each utterance prompts a collective response or feedback indiscriminately from other members of the group.

- i. **Gwen:** Under what circumstances would you recommend blanket fertilisation? (5)
- ii. **Mildred:** From my own reasoning, there are some crops that you don't need to test the nutrient requirement in the soil
- iii. **Valerine:** [you have to test] for everything
- iv. Mildred: [there are crops that] when you put the fertiliser it does not have any effect on the crop
- v. **Valerine:** [in large scale and in small scale] that may be one of the parameters that might come in...in blanket application nah that is my own that is coming in my head – you come nah, you pour fertiliser on all the land without saying that I am putting under this plant, I am putting under this plant
- vi. **Gwen:** [that is bud-casting]
- vii. **Mildred:** [For that one they] say strict application of fertiliser
- viii. **Gwen:** [Delphine, say what you want to say in this question.] Under what circumstance will you do blanket application?

The segment opens and closes with the same questions 'under what circumstance...' (i) if the first opens the discussion with a focus on 'if' the student knew, the second refocuses or converges understandings (viii). In between, learners try out divergent

view or understandings and voices of what they know – Mildred: ‘from my own reasoning;’ and Valerine: ‘my own that is coming in my head’ (from my understanding). Hence, as with Agbor and Estel exploring knowledge about *conflict theory* and *evolutionary theory* above, learners try out their voices and empower each other’s voice in expanding what they each already know in a ‘dynamic and dialogical way’ (ibid).

Learners themselves are aware of the formative opportunity that group talk offers. This explains why Roland admittedly loses his patience with some members of his group, as he explains during focus group interview:

As you noticed during the session, they (other students) wanted me to say it [to articulate knowledge] the way they wanted because they believe that I know more than they do. I never wanted to say it. We are all learning. The way you put it is not the same way I am going to put it. As such, things like copy-work (reproducing each other’s assignment) does not become a problem in the exam.

Roland CUIB2 (Level 300 student, School of Business) Focus group
interview 14th March 2015

Ask why he values unrestricted participation to group talk, Agbor explains in Focus group interview that followed his interaction with Estel:

...that is why I always tell them [his peers] that I will not come and explain a question in ways that you will just come and go and write [meaning: the examination or test]. But, you come. We discuss. We share ideas. Then we each go for the exams individually.

This shows that most learners value each other’s voices as a way of harnessing meaning and expanding knowledge (See Appendix 5.3) on for further analysis of the interaction between Agbor and Estel).

Analysis of data reveal that learners themselves are eager to create space for formative dialogue which stimulate different understandings knowledge. Two students from the department of Banking and Finance, Ebge and Jeanne, feel confident enough in their dialogue with each other to stimulate hypothetical scenario in their Accounting course:

1. **Ebge:** Go back to the entries on the left (2) Ok. What if account number 4102, Customer BICEC Bank, were replaced by a non-regular customer? What if the entry did not provide regular revenue?
2. **Jeanne:** Now that makes it all complicated. But let’s try and see what it will give. In budget allocation everything is possible.

CUa3, Third Year Students in Banking and Finance, School of Business,
14th March 2015, Audio 08:34 minutes

The questions in line 1 are open-ended, prompting input from peers that are specific to their understanding of the hypothetical situation; input that allows them to forage the sphere of the unknown in their learning, making possible the emergence of multiple voices in the learning discourse.

In all, within a dialectic learning, formative assessments involve the role of a teacher in sustaining an ongoing dialogue between learners and their curriculum towards an inter-subjective construction of knowledge. Within a dialogic informal setting, the absence of a classroom or of the mediating role of a teacher does not preclude learners from taking responsibility over the process of using formative assessment procedures to establish if they understand, and secondly, what they understand. Segments of interaction above show that most participants seem conscious of this process throughout informal learning activities. They are actively involved in stimulating instances of dialogue whereby the strategic movements between the convergent and divergent poles of assessment task at hand are duly observed and their outcome accordingly validated by each group member. Group talk therefore is a formative and ‘expansive’ exploration of knowledge; one that draws individual learners into a multifaceted process of dialogue with other learners. Beginning with inquiries on *if* learners know, group talks allows learners to explore *what* they know, by expanding specific demands in ways that open alternative modes of understanding. This process is prompted and directed solely by assessment demands as perceived by learners themselves.

5.2.2.4 Metacognition and the Agency of Voice

In higher education pedagogy, it is often assumed that effective learning depends on learners’ critical engagement with content knowledge (Johnston *et al.*, 2011). However, from a psychosocial perspective, students’ awareness of the cognitive processes and strategies involved in their learning also plays an important part in their learning (Fisher, 2007). During focus group discussion, learners could demonstrate their awareness of the cognitive processes and strategies involved in group learning. Asked why she was reluctant to solve a problem during a group activity, a fourth-year student at the Department of Information Technology explains:

Why should I? I knew that they were doing it the wrong way. I kept quiet. We come here to work our brains not our ears. I wanted them to think. Failing the equation at a first try is also part of learning. That way you learn the hard way and it sticks better.

rCUIB4, Level 4 Mathematics Student, School of Information and Technology) 12th April 2015

So, when prompted during research, individual learners can identify and monitoring what they perceive to be effective learning within their respective groups. This is in line with the notion that younger learners, when prompted properly through ‘guided models,’ ‘ground-rules’ and ‘reflections’, learning can become a liberating exercise, with far reaching social implications for learners involved (Sutherland, 2013). Likewise, research in higher education calls for teaching interventions within the classroom that involve more ‘meaningful, purposeful and social interactions, and reflective promptings’ as ways of improving learners’ awareness of the processes and strategies involved in their learning, also known as metacognitive learning (Saudi-Urena, *et al.* 2011). Apart from focus group interview, where metacognitive processes are made obvious through promptings and reflexions on previous group experiences, university learners’ awareness of processes and strategies involved in their knowing is intrinsically wedded into every learning interaction. In order words, identifying and validating effective learning through informal group learning activities does not necessarily require special ‘intervention acts’ (Saudi-Urena *et al.*, 2011) or ‘ground rules,’ ‘guided models’ and ‘reflections’ as Sunderland proposes. Group learning activities by themselves appear to be essentially metacognitive and contribute to effective learning.

Often viewed from a Vygotskian perspective, metacognitive learning strategies in research are situated between individual learner’s *knowledge* and *regulation* of cognition (Brown, 1987, p.66; Schraw, 2001; Saudi-Urena *et al.*, 2011). Hence, to fully measure the potential of metacognition in learning, the role of a teacher-facilitator is often integrated in the process. The teacher establishes and enforces the ground rules by which individual learner’s construction of their understanding of knowledge is regulated. It is for this reason that metacognitive analyses have often been used to assess individual learning within very specific subject contexts (Zohar & Barzilai, 2013).

Accessing and analysis metacognitive awareness in group talk will require at least two things: firstly, a research framework which distinguishes between knowledge and

awareness of knowing. This distinction makes it possible to overcome the dominant tendency of considering metacognition as an after-thought of learning. Metacognition should be part of learning itself, not a reflection of, or the awareness of learning. Secondly, it requires that group talk be interpreted as the outcome of a collective endeavour. The *Awareness of Independent Learning Inventory* (AILI) (Meijer *et al.* 2013) offers a useful framework because, as it focuses on learners' *responsiveness* as a basis for collective endeavours in metacognitive learning, and meets both requirements. This means that metacognitive learning is achieved when learners are proactive in responding to each other during group talk.

Applied to informal collaborative learning discussion, each learning interaction seems to give learners the ability to position themselves within a nonagonal metacognitive frame of reference as shown below. Every utterance is, first of all, a response which expresses the learner's metacognitive point of entry into group discussion (for a copy of the full transcript of this collaborative talk). The table below (Table 4) is a metacognitive evaluation of an exploratory talk on *Radiation*. The talk involved three students Jasmine, Ulrich and Lauriette. The dialogue was carried out in the French language (see Appendix 5.4 for English translations) of sections that were used below. Preferably the table should be read alongside Appendix 4.5.

		Metacognitive Inventory								
Discourse		Metacognitive Knowledge			Metacognitive Regulation			Metacognitive Responsiveness		
		PK	SK	STK	PR	ER	EvR	ExG	FbR	CoG R
1.	<i>J³: what is Radiation?...</i>					X		X		
2.	<i>J: Radiation...</i>						X			X
3.	<i>L: Radiation is...</i>			X						X
4.	<i>J: Yes, [the atmosph]...</i>					X			X	
5.	<i>U: Yes, One of way...</i>			X					X	
6.	<i>L: Convection...</i>					X			X	
7.	<i>J: Conduction and Convection...</i>					X			X	
8.	<i>L: But conduction and Convection...</i>						X		X	
9.	<i>J: That one is Transp...</i>			X						X
10.	<i>U: So we can just talk...</i>		X					X		
11.	<i>J: Where is my book...</i>	X						X		

Table 4: Formative expansion of shared knowledge (Level 400 Sociology and Anthropology student) 16th March 2015 (PK= Personal Knowledge; SK = Strategic knowledge; STK = Study Task knowledge; PR= Personal Regulation; ER= Evaluation Regulation, EvR= Execution Regulation; ExG = Execution Responsiveness; FbR= Feedback Responsiveness; CoG= Cognitive Responsiveness)

The shaded right column of the table indicates that every utterance is a response either to knowledge or to how knowledge is regulated in discourse. In the first row of the table (line 1), ‘*What is radiation?*’ introduces Jasmine’s point of entry into discussion as an act of ‘executive responsiveness;’ meaning that her group puts her already in the position to actualise her voice, which she does by introducing task. The question format of her voice signifies an attempt at ‘regulating’ (Executive). In her second intervention in line 2 ‘Radiation, which is an interrupted attempt to voice a response. Her response would have come in as ‘cognitive’ response, just as Lauriette. From line 4-8, other voices interject in form of feedback responses to Lauriette’ cognitive intervention in

³ J = Jasmin ; U = Ulrich; L = Lauriette

line 3. Each utterance or learner's voice necessarily positions the learner involved within a nine-angle frame of reference, that is, a frame in which the speaker makes a judgment of responding, either by stating their awareness of knowledge or by regulating the process through which knowledge is expressed. Informal, group talk essentially allows individual learners in their responsiveness, to position their voices in a '*meta-syn-cognitive*' discourse, conditioned by the collective inter-responsiveness of the group.

The ability of each learner to position themselves within the '*meta-syn-cognitive*' dynamic of group talk, in response to specific assessment demands, is perhaps the most secured basis from which judicious claims could be made about effective learning in informal collaborative groups. In his own words, a level 400 Physics students articulate what his understanding of this process involves:

When you are in a group somebody can have an idea that will help you get something very fast...when you contribute ideas you get a solution easily. When you want to think something somebody who knows it already will tell you 'write it this way'. Sometimes we even argue because no one has all the answers. But together we look for it [the answer] and gradually we get it...this is how the group works.

Jack: UB4 Level 400 Physics Student in focus group interview 15th March 2015

Jack recognises the involvement of his peers at every level of his thought process: helping him 'get something very fast,' providing him with basis for his own voice, and regulating his voice according to learning expectations.

5.2.2.2.4 Critical Thinking and the Agency of Voice

Critical thinking is often upheld as evidence of effective learning in higher education, yet it is often theorised through many and at time contrasting approaches and philosophies. Recent theorization tends to focus on the learner's ability and disposition towards continuous thinking, questioning, and challenging of assumptions, as ways of constructing higher cognitive understanding of knowledge (Amua-Sekyi, 2011: p.31-32). In this case, university students' informal group talk is by default oriented towards critical thinking. This is because during group discussions, learners are actively engaged in constructing knowledge through thought-provoking questions and problem-solving skills (Dwyer *et al.*, 2014) as illustrated in the discussion on soil fertility below:

Ndo: You said that (Soil fertility is) the amount of nutrient present in the soil (8) So I was saying it is correct.

Chiato: If the nutrients were not present in the soil would they be available (to plants)?

Keneth: The nutrients can be present but not available to the plant (.) if they are not present they cannot be available to the plant

UBv3 Third Year Students in Agriculture. Video recorded on 23rd March 2015 at 23:00pm, segment, 34mins onward

The dialogue reflects learners' critical engagement with the definition of *soil fertility*. Ndo, Chiato and Kenneth are involved in a deconstruction of key concepts involved in the definition of *soil fertility*, *present* and *available*, beyond the content knowledge as provided by classroom lessons. As such, thinking critically, in a broad sense, is an obvious part of group learning experiences. This can be confirmed by temporal indicators in the transcriptions of data-sets which suggest that learners' voices emerge because of cognitive reflective judgments and systematic reasoning. Hence, pauses identified in the data-set, ranging from one to eight seconds, occurring between individual utterances and speakers, indicate collective thought processes that are reflexive, analytical and creative. These processes are opened to critical actions – which are all evidences of criticality in higher education learning (Dunne, 2015).

At the same time, learning in higher education is not just a cognitive experience, it is an embodied, relational and affectively charged experience' (Crossouard, 2012 p.745). Consequently, the informal and relational context of group talk involves embodied and affective practices and attitudes by which learners exercise critical thinking in less cognitive and mechanic way, according to Danvers' (2016) understanding of critical thinking. In a recent PhD thesis, Danvers theorises critical thinking from a poststructuralist-feminist standpoint. Her perspective challenges the concept of neutrality of the critical being, who is not just as 'cognitive doing' but as 'deep affective practice' (p.141) She argues based on an understanding of critical thinking that seeks to overcome the affect/emotion-reason binary in higher education. Thus, she views critical thinking as entangling 'processes of becoming critical which are complex, contingent, embodied and at stake in the production of conflicting affects' (Danvers, 2016; p.140). Within this

framework, some learning interactions among participants of group talk in Cameroon stand out as possibly contextually constructed experiences of critical thinking in learning. In solving a mathematical problem, Evans and Satch must deal with two conflicting solutions:

1. **Evans:** Look at it again, Satch, is it not making sense?
2. **Satch:** That is just another way on how to reach these two products (*(points at a mathematic problem)*). I have been doing maths ever since, except you people want to tell me that I have been having but wrong knowledge. I am telling you! (*(turning to another student)*) We::eh my friend do not no laugh
3. **Evans:** Let us use this thing in the exam (*(placing his finger on a mathematical symbol on the chalkboard)*) and see who will have the correct answer
4. **Satch:** You will not even see your paper (*(presuming the feedback would be so disappointing)*)
5. **Evans:** I will go and do research

The conflict seems to challenge not just Evans' and Satch's understanding of a mathematical problem but also their sense of self as learners. Through a mathematical problem, Satch in line 2 is led to question his entire experience of learning mathematics, both past and present. Evans in line 3 relates his understanding of the mathematical problem to expected learning outcomes of the 'exam', so does Satch in sarcastic manner (line 4). In line 5, Evans positions himself as a researcher. The conflicting instance, framed by laughter, sarcasm and self-evaluation, allows learners' voices to emerge as embodying different roles, and frames of references in learning, which empower learners in their creative licence. Danvers' uses the construct of '*critical hope*,' to highlight the complex intermingling between *reason* and affectivity, both of which learners embody and legitimise knowledge. Critical hope recognizes, in critical thinking, the dual potential to 'be troublesome' and to 'feel troubling' – as basis for any possible transformation.' (ibid). Hence, by providing a 'critical' context to learning beyond scientific rationality, informal collaborative learning enhances the pedagogic context of university learning in Cameroon.

Summarily, the pedagogic relevance of informal collaborative learning cannot be over-emphasized. In focus group interviews, students viewed informal collaborative learning groups strictly in terms of academic concerns. Putting academic concerns aside, if

learners felt confident enough to face university studies independently, there would be no reason to come together with peers to learn, as a freshman, Andong remarked, much to the acquiescence of his study group peers:

One must not necessarily join a group to succeed in their studies...you just need to know why you are here and work hard to graduate on time...

CU1 (Level 200 student – freshman) focus group interview, 2nd February 2015

But with time, such perceptions are bound to evolve as students begin to face the harsh reality of meeting learning expectations within the material constraints of their specific learning environments. Informal collaborative learning then becomes part of university learning experience itself. Jubilee, a third student in the department of Marketing and Business explains,

When you come here, early enough you realise that you cannot learn everything alone...our system relies so much on lectures. In amphi 750 [Amphitheatre 750], for example, you have about 800 students inside, all together. Not everybody can ‘materialise’ what the teacher is trying to say.

Jubilee rUB2 (Level 300 Education Psychology student), focus group interview 04th February 2015

Hence, Jubilee’s view of group talk as an opportunity to ‘materialise’ what the teacher says. This view echoes Vygotsky (1978) fundamental claim that it is by talking that learning occurs, for, information in learners’ minds is mediated, structured and restructured in the form of dialogue with others. As such, group talk also gives students the opportunity, not just to passively absorb factual knowledge, but to practise using higher-cognitive processes audibly, supported by what has been described as the ‘vicarious consciousness’ of the other (Bruner, 1986, p.72). Drawing from her personal experience, Jubilee explains the benefit of being part of a group:

I took an introductory course known as ‘Elementary Statistics’. I did not know anything about statistics because I had long given up on mathematics. A good grade on this statistic course was necessary for me because it is a prerequisite for graduate studies in my department. As such I was so afraid of the course. But my attitude towards the course changed when we had the first test. My colleague here [*of the same study group*] who was very good at mathematics prepared me for the test. I took the examination with ease. Everything we had talked about was part of the test...

New learning identities, centred more on the collective process of learning, are equally constructed and sustained:

When you read alone you easily forget what you have read. When a fellow student explains you understand better ... when you are talking and I am looking at you I tend to remember very easily if I later have to answer questions on the subject ... it is like being in a classroom here, as opposed to reading a note book on your own without ever coming to listen to the lecturer. In that case it becomes difficult for you to visualize the topic...

Soso CU3 (Level 400 student), focus group interview number 01, 3rd February 2015

It is also common to find students who owe their entire university experience to group learning experiences, as, Takov, a final year student affirms:

This group brought me back to real schooling, helping me to become a more serious student. Initially, I saw no reason coming to school. Like many university students, I was interested in validating my courses using every means possible except hard work. I met him (*pointing at another participant*) and he motivated me, promising me that if I came to school we were going to study together. He kept to his promise and I am grateful that he still does today. If not I would have dropped out of school like many of my friends.

TakovUB3 (Level 400 student) in focus group interview number 02, 8th February 2015

To achieve ‘agency’ in this learning community, this student had to learn how to inhabit the identity of a ‘serious’ student, being apprenticed in this process by his peer. This echoes the work of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) on learning communities, which draws attention to how peripheral members of the community are gradually apprenticed, not just into the community’s skills and understandings, but also into core values and beliefs essential to becoming a member of that particular community. This means that student’s agency, voice and identity are significantly shaped by this communal experience which is essentially informal; unaligned – but not entirely independent of – institutional structures.

In all, as learners make progress through the university, they are involved in a selective process of learning strategies. Based on data analysed, learning is enhanced when learners take on different social roles which all helps them to arrive at their own voices in their academic communities. How learners perceived assessment demands allow them

to position themselves within the academic discourses of their respective learning communities. Through these strategies, informal, collaborative learning experiences gradually become part of the university learning experience itself. With time and experience, learners begin to perceive these groups as enabling structures that make their ‘agentic sense of self’ possible within the university. For within these groups students develop specific learning habits and practices that are congruent with the learning expectations in their area of study. The academic benefits of group talk however, are never without sociocultural implications, which account for how learners’ identities are constituted and sustained (Alexander, 2005; Gee, 2011). This takes us to the next chapter of this thesis.

CHAPTER SIX

“THE IMPERCEPTIBLE COLOUR OF CONTEXT”

SOCIO-CULTURAL FEATURES OF INFORMAL COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings on the social and cultural relevance of informal collaborative learning. It is closely related to the previous chapter as the next stage in rendering full account of the complex processes involved when learners in Cameroon universities construct their understanding and knowledge through group talk.

As argued earlier (section 5.1), analyses here are undergirded by sociocultural perspectives, which hold that the way language is acquired and used has a profound effect on how learners think, what they do and what they become (Gee, 1999). It also explains how collective understandings, identities and culture are created from interactions among individuals (Mercer & Howe, 2012). Associated with Bakhtinian dialogism, the learner's voice positioned within discourse is the medium through which sociocultural representations are constructed and manifested. Hence, analysis focuses on learners' voices, rather than on predetermined social and cultural structures and institutions as basis for sociocultural representations (Wortham, 2011), justifying the underlying assumption of this chapter that specific representations of culture are not inherited from language (Gee, 2011) or from institutions but are constructed through learners' voices as positioned in group talk. This means that the analysis of learners' voices as positioned in group talk can provide insights on how they make meaning of social interactions in their given contexts. This chapter also foregrounds possible discussions on how learners' in Cameroon are constituted and sustained.

6.2 The Agency of Learners' Voices and Sociocultural Representations

Group talk aims at constructing understanding of knowledge through the voices of learners. The informal space of group talk allows learners to explore knowledge ac-

cording to its relevance to the academic and social contexts within which learning occurs. In formal classrooms learners are assisted by teachers in framing knowledge based on intended learning outcomes. In informal group talk, learners themselves, through their voices, are responsible for framing and constructing their understanding of knowledge drawing from contingent social and cultural feature which grant relevance to knowledge. From a sociolinguistic perspective, Gee (2011) highlights the dual context of every discourse, its '*fixed context*' and '*flexible context*' (p.84-85) The '*fixed*' context provides the 'physical' setting of communication, while the '*flexible*' or '*re-flexive*' context represents the facilitating and enabling feature of communication. Taken outside of its linguistic framing, Gee's distinction serves as a heuristic tool in distinguishing the pedagogic context of group talk, considered as fixed and as related to content knowledge, from the sociocultural context which facilitates the construction of learner's understanding of knowledge. In other words, knowledge as constructed in context, also embodies the natural features which grants relevance to knowledge as it emerges.

To clarify the difference between the fixed and the flexible contexts of discourse, I begin by presenting segment of the data involving Evelyn, Delphine and Aury, which opened the analysis section of this thesis. I use it here to highlight the different between the fixed and the flexible contexts in the same discourse. The former focuses on the constructing knowledge and the latter providing sociocultural relevance to knowledge as it emerges. Both interact recursively to construct understandings of knowledge as relevant within a given context

1. **Evelyn:** (reading) Why do you classify soils? 2 marks
2. **Delphine:** We classify soil to know the method of formation of the soil (...) To know the observed properties such as
3. **Aury:** [the soil tension, the soil=] Where did you take this answer Delphine? Where did you take this answer?
4. **Delphine:** In the book. Tello (*the lecturer*) gave it.
5. **Aury:** [Which Tello?] He has notes.

Based on internal movement pertaining to this excerpt, two cluster of words can be identified, related to two parallel but intersecting focuses unfolding within the dialogue:

lines 1-2 and 5b-6 (A)

'we'

'soil'

'method,' 'property', 'feature' of soil...

lines 3-5 (B)

'you,' 'Delphine,' 'I,' 'Tello'

'answer'

'it'

One cluster of words is about the scientific knowledge of *soil classification* – A (lines 1-2 and 5b-6). The other cluster of words expresses a 'meta-reflexion' on the first (lines 3-5). Both clusters of words are generated by the same speakers who, at different times in discussion position their voices either within cluster A or cluster B. Both participate

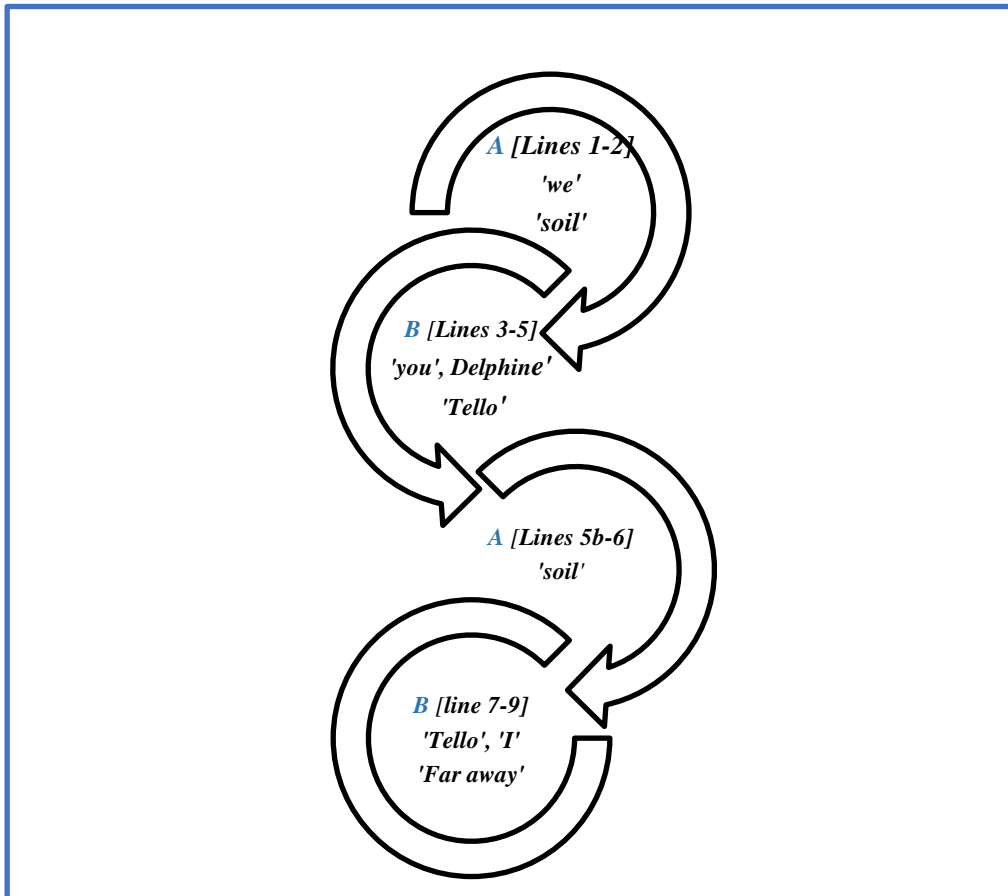


Figure 5: Interweaving Contexts of Discourse

in constructing learners' understanding of knowledge. A consistently establishes the fixed properties of knowledge while B persistently shapes the context of the relevance of knowledge.

As *Delphine* seeks to answer *Eveline*'s question by constructing scientific knowledge, *Aury* positions her voice as a test to the epistemic authority of knowledge that *Delphine* presents. Throughout the discussion, both speakers interweave their voices. It is in this interweaving that knowledge is constructed and its relevance established through sociocultural features that will be identified below. This echoes *Tin*'s study of exploratory classroom talks among Malaysian university students. Examining the value of exploratory talk among university learners in Malaysia, *Tin* distinguishes '*additive*' talk, or talk that contributes to the construction of knowledge, and '*related*' talk, that has no epistemic value in discourse (2003). Unlike *Tin*, I argue that from a dialogic stand point, no talk is without its specific function in the construction of knowledge, if talk is understood as a positioning of the individual learner's voice in the discussion. Where necessary, part of talk provides the flexible or reflexive context that adds currency to knowledge and meaning.

Furthermore, each unit of interaction can be further subdivided into fixed and flexible contexts depending on how the university learner, *Delphine*, positions herself, her initial voice, in relation to the scientific knowledge implied in her affirmation. As such,

A 'We': Represent a *flexible* frame of reference (she choose not to repeat 'you' from *Evelyn*'s initiating task 'why do you...' or not to use the third person pronoun 'it' or the 'passive.')

B 'classify soil to know the method of formation of the soil [...] To know the observed properties such as [...]': represents the *fixed* frame – crude scientific knowledge which does not depend on any contingent circumstances in discussion. It is the voice of knowledge.

This present study shows that the reflexive or flexible context of discourse appears in different genres; in the form of grammatical descriptors or 'meta-pragmatic' descriptors (Wortham & Locher, 1996) - 'we,' 'you,' 'I'; in the form of abrupt interruptions as in the case of *Aury* above (line 3-5), playfulness, diacritic responses, metaphoric responses, and more. As will be illustrated below, they are related to the construction of understanding of knowledge in various ways and degrees, fulfilling specific functions

through which relevance is added to knowledge as constructed. I centre analysis around issues of power, group dynamics, socialisation, gender, professional and religious sense of identity that learners' voices bring to group talk as concrete representations of the sociocultural context of learning in Cameroon.

6.2.1 Voice and Power

Learners' voices as related to power is one of the ways through which learners position themselves in discussion as sociocultural beings. Since no voice, utterance or discourse is ever complete or close, power refers to learners' ability to strategically situate their voices in ongoing dialogue. In dialogue, each voice or utterance is an exercise of power, in as much as it seeks to override all other voices and utterances. Hence, at a surface level, Delphine's response that 'we classify soil...' in response to Evelyn evidences the *initiation-response-feedback* (IRF) pattern of learning (Sinclair & Courtland, 1975), which is related to content focus learning of the classroom. Nonetheless, from a dialogic stance, where voice, not content is the focus of learning, the speaker's specific use of the 'we' strongly signifies the nature of her social participation in discourse (Wortham & Locher, 1996). 'We' signifies the conscious identification of herself as a member of a scientific community, engaging in a scientific debate involving and authoritative scientific discourse which she ventriloquates in a bid to make it her own. Through her use of 'we,' which can also be interpreted inclusively, she also seeks to position her peers into scientific discourse. So, Delphine's construction of her understanding of knowledge on soil classification is undergirded by the aspirations of her voice to be part of the authoritative scientific knowledge under construction. It is an aspiration to the epistemic power that scientific knowledge embodies.

6.2.2 Voice, Power and Knowledge

The acquisition of the scientific language of knowledge evidences power in at least two ways. Firstly, Delphine uses scientific vocabulary as she makes heavy use of abstract nouns and subordinate clauses 'to know the method of formation [...] to know the observed properties [...].' Secondly through her use of formal phrases, for example, – 'such as' (line 2) as opposed to 'like,' which would be more consistent with the colloquial nature of peer group talk. But because scientific vocabulary provides her with a

standard English registry, her own voice ‘such as’ is blended into the formal registry to talk. She feels empowered to do so through her voice.

As such, through the positioning of her voice in discussion, Delphine seeks to identify with the voice ‘of knowledge,’ the voice of power. University learners, as will be illustrated below, tend to value their voices and contributions in discussions when they feel that their voices are approximations of the scientific knowledge as constructed in appropriate scientific language. For knowing is related to power; and power is related to knowing and to the legitimate language that expresses knowledge (Bourdieu, 1991).

6.2.3 Voice, Power and Institutions

In Bourdieu’s view, (1991; p.60) legitimate language, without the institutions which they represent is only ‘a semi-artificial language,’ which must be ‘sustained by a permanent effort of correction, a task which falls both to institutions specially designed for this purpose and to individual speakers’ (ibid: p.60). It is for this reason that the response which Delphine provides on why ‘we’ classify soil owes its legitimacy to the institution from which it derives its meaning. Without any explicit reference to any such structure in her response, Aury’s voice interrupts discussion (line 3-5): ‘*where did you take this answer, Delphine, where did you take this answer?*’ In terms of meaning, Aury’s question apparently disrupts the flow of ongoing discussion on *soil classification*. But at the same time, her voice does not also depart from the initial attempt of constructing the group’s understanding of knowledge. In fact, her interest in the source/authority of knowledge being discussed reinforces the value and relevance of knowledge as its understanding is being constructed through Delphine’s voice. In line 4-5, Delphine acquiesces to Aury’s inquest as follows: ‘*in the book. Tello (surname of the lecturer) gave it.*’ Aury’s voice does not add to what might be considered scientific knowledge on ‘*why do we classify soil?*’ Nonetheless, her voice in the overall discourse provides the reflexive frames through which knowledge is presented, and reflexive process through which the ‘semi-artificial language in which it is presented is ‘corrected’ and legitimised. The full transcription of the dialogue (Appendix 5.1) shows that the same process of affirmation of knowledge and its systematic verification is reproduced throughout the discussion.

Hence, I argue that a key sociocultural feature of informal collaborative learning, from the stand point of learners in Cameroon universities, is that knowledge is valued, in terms of the epistemic authority with which it is presented. This echoes another segment in data where Nguefor deliberates on specific assessment tasks based, not on the objective nature of knowledge, but rather on the specific preferences and administrative authority of one teaching lecturer over another:

Nguefor: ((to peer who had just read from a handout)): [Who wrote that?] *Tayou (name of lecturer)*. He will not be the one assessing the course. Since it is the final examination, the main lecturer [name: *Yankou*] will obviously get involved. It means that you have to be careful how you use words...

CUa3 Year Three Students in School of Business, 23 February 2015, Segment 23 mins onward

In Nguefor's view, being '*careful how you use words [...]*' has to do with the construction of her understanding of knowledge based on contingent factors external to scientific knowledge itself. The legitimacy of institutional power must be considered. Clearly then, from the point of view of power, as part of learning in Cameroon universities, students perceive, value and position their individual voices better in knowledge when it is closely related to institutional discourse; particularly to specific subject content, to specific learning outcomes and in relation to the specific epistemic authority of each lecturer and to the degree of the lecturer's involvement with teaching, learning and assessment. Thus, the construction of knowledge in Cameroon universities, through the voice of learners, cannot undermine the legitimacy that institutions and structures bring to it. Understanding of knowledge as constructed in group talk, derives meaning from institution and have implications within institutions.

6.2.4 Voice, Power and Language of Learning

In addition, the dynamic use of learning is one of the features of group talk by which learners frame the construction of their understanding of knowledge in Cameroon universities. By 'dynamic use of language,' I refer to learners' ability to vacillate, and spontaneously between a few languages during group talk, the main ones being between English and French. Translanguaging is a typical feature of discussions (See Appendix for sample transcription). During field work, I observed that in English speaking universities, outside of formal learning environment, French is used almost as frequently

as English itself while in the one French speaking university included in this study, the use of English language did not feature in group talk, even among learners who later positioned themselves as English speaking Cameroonians.

In English speaking contexts, the use of the French language in group talk varies and depends entirely on users' convenience given that most higher education learners in Cameroon have at least a good mastery of one of the official languages, as well as a basic understanding of the other, particularly in the English-speaking part of the country. When introduced into group talk, the French language is often used in very unconventional ways. For example, within the same utterance, learners switch from one language to another, as below:

Je prends ça je *multiply* avec ça
 ((Translation: *I use this to multiply the other*))

UBa2, Level 300 student, Metrix in Zoology, Department of Agriculture, 12th March 2015, 2:40

Explaining the purpose of using French in her group talk, Jeanette emphasized the functional value of the French language in use in her group, where all four of her peers came from a French speaking background like herself.

The purpose of explaining in French is to put across a message so that the core of the message might be understood by all. Once that is understood, everyone can change to any language they prefer (...) so we aim for understanding

rCUIB4 Business Management Law and Ethics – 13th March 2015

In another group (CUIB4, year 4 ICT students – 21 February 2015), learners emphasize freedom of expression as underlying their use of French in studying English-based courses, more than any other reason. As Kami explains, using the official discourse around language policies in relation to higher education in Cameroon: '*Cameroon is a bilingual country; everyone is free to express themselves in whatever language they want.*' So *Translanguaging* provides learners with the licence to take ownership of learning experiences in ways that are strategic and most convenient within their social, historical and cultural contexts.

Nevertheless, use of colonial languages like English and French in postcolonial settings where language is said to mediate ‘cultural productions’ (Bourdieu 1993; Miller 2003; Taylor *et al.*, 2009) remains problematic, particularly in its relationship to learning. Even more, constructing an understanding of the use of a particular language by non-native speakers as the basis through which understanding and sense of self are shaped only further compound any conclusions that could be reached with multiple layers of complexities (Norton & Toohey, 2011). By extension, this complexity applies to all the linguistic, semantic and syntactic variations and grammatical translanguaging that students’ voices represent and create and utilise in constructing their understanding of knowledge. For example,

Aury: [I don’t know!] you don’t have your ‘exemplificator’
here (*a coinage derived from the word ‘example’, one who
gives examples*)

UB2a Level 300 Agriculture Students, 13 February 2016, Segment 5:15 minute to 7:11 minutes

‘[E]xamplificator’ is a coined, not an English word. But her semantic index (Wortham & Locher, 1996) is made possible by the *pluri*-lingual context of group talk in Cameroon, one that empowers and emboldens learners to venture with their voices beyond the limits of official languages and discourse.

For this predominantly French speaking central African nation, the persistent use of French in English speaking institutions of learning might reflect language attitudes which are undergirded by ideologies, remotely constructed and sustained both by institutions and discourses that favour French over English as the language of power (Abongdia, 2010). This means that when Delphine swap from English to French, in response to Aury’s query expressed in English,

Delphine: ((In French)) *Tello gave it*

her voice is underlid, among other contingent factors, by language attitudes reflecting ways by which power and identities are mediated through language in twenty-first Century Cameroon society. This also applies to the use of other less formal languages in

group talk. But then it was also noted that learners tend to use other non-official languages, such as, pidgin English and pseudo-English to expand and explain their personal understanding of official discourse. After having articulated her constructed understanding of the meaning of *Blanket Fertiliser* application to her peers, Ernestine, a second-year student abruptly swoops from standard English to Pidgin-English to better explicate her understanding. I have endeavoured to translate, with close approximation to the English language without sacrificing the volatility of syntax in pidgin English, which is without specific rules of grammar, and better accommodates passionate-personalised and interactive expressions of meaning than the English language:

...in blanket application [*nah*] I am try to explain from my own understanding [*as coming to my head*] [*oh*] – you have to pour fertiliser on the land indiscriminately, that is, without saying that ‘I am putting under this plant, I am putting under this plant...’

Ernestine’s, UBv2, Level 300 Agriculture Students, 12th March 2015, video segment 05:43 to 6:30

The expression ‘coming in my head’ can be translated in English as ‘the process of understanding.’ A more literal translation of the expression translates the rawness of the experience, that it’s the modality of understanding, rather than the outcome of a meaning. Hence, Ernestine’s impulsive Pidgin-English utterance positions her voice, outside of the material constraints of grammar and rigid context of knowledge, allowing her to construct her understanding of knowledge rather than reproduce already constructed expressions of knowledge. This echoes Bakhtin’s view of language as the product of human consciousness containing both the ‘impulse’ to ‘interiorise’ as is, and the ‘impulse’ to ‘re-orient’ and give new meaning to monologic discourse (Bernard-Donals, 1994: p.171). So, while the spontaneous use of the French language in group discussions is a regular occurrence across data in this study, its abrupt and passionate use suggests the close relationship between reason and affect (Danvers, 2016), when it comes to the construction of relevant meaning. This is because, learners are not just rational beings, but ‘critical bodies located in the particularities of the social characteristics, differences, and multiple intersecting impacts these have on their own experiences’ (Danvers, 2016: p.3). The use of languages, particularly non-standard languages in group talk, is another way by which learners are empowered to frame and enable the construction of their understanding of knowledge in the Cameroonian context.

6.2.2 Voice and Group Socialization

Group talk is essentially a social experience. From a Bakhtinian stand point, group talk is made possible through *addressivity*, which is openness to ‘another’ (Bakhtin, 1986: p.167). Along the same perspective, according to Wegerif (2008: p.359), socialisation through dialogue has an ‘ontological’ significance, which means that voices in dialogue are essentially linked to learners’ understanding of who they are. So, without dialogue and the socialising opportunities it offers, learner’s voices cannot be fully actualised (See also Wegerif, 2005). Hence, the construction of the understanding of knowledge among learners is framed by socialising interactions through which learners actualise their collective freedom and creativity, and by so doing add relevance to knowledge.

A reoccurring way through which learners express socialisation in group talk is through playfulness. Often followed by laughter and emotional outburst, playful interactions of some kind are part of every group talk. In their own ways, interweaving specific discussions about knowledge, playfulness contributes to the construction of learner’s understanding of knowledge either directly or indirectly.

The relationship between play and cognition, since Piaget (1958), is well established in literature and extensively researched in early childhood learning and basic education. According to Gray (2013), the value of playfulness resides in its ability to cognitively liberate young minds from the pressure of performance and creativity, which are necessary for insightful problem solving in children. In higher education, educators value playful learning activities, even if studies on play and the precise ways by which play or playfulness enhances learning seems missing in empirical research (Tanis, 2012). Emphasis seems to be on the pedagogic function of playfulness within a structured classroom lesson; which has led to the models of classroom learning that purposely accommodate, measure, limit, and utilise play as a means of achieving specific learning outcomes. Based on these models, the educator or teacher is the epicentre of learning and acts as the direct arbiter of playfulness, when it is employed as a tool, using intended learning outcomes. However, group talk, undertaken outside of the formal setting of the classroom seems to accommodate a more liberating use of play and playfulness. Group discussion on disciplinary knowledge is often interwoven with playful comments, creating a playful learning environment around group talk.

In an excerpt of the data collected, Darione, Eposi and Asek, from the School of Agriculture, discuss *Sunflower*. Segments of Discussion as presented below captures Darione's attempt to construct her understanding of the definition of *Sunflower*. Almost every utterance is framed by laughter and playful interjections, yet the construction of Darion's understanding of the meaning of *sunflower* remains uninterrupted. In presenting the dialogue, I underline specific clauses that prompt laughter:

1. **Darione:** Sunflower is a plant with broad leaves that have two broad cotyledons..."
2. **Eposi:** A leaf does not have cotyledon
3. **Darion:** ((Exclamation)) e::eh!! (laughter))
4. **Eposi +Asek:** [it geminates] with two large cotyledons
5. **Asek:** [(...) confuse oh! You] are killing birds referring to another error Darion had made previously) and accusing sunflower that it is a leaf ((laughter))
6. **Eposi:** t is through confusion that she can reason ((laughter))
7. **Asek:** She is so confused ((laughter))
8. **Eposi:** "Do not think that you have said much" ((laughter))
9. **Darion:**" Sunflower is a plant with broad leaf
10. **Asek:** with a broad leaf! Not broad leaf. ((laughter))

UB2a Level 300 Agriculture Students, 13 February 2016, Segment
05:15 minute to 06:51 minutes

"A leaf does not have cotyledon;" Eposi (line 2) could have said this in a different way. But she positions her voice in a way that prompts laughter, even from Darione herself (line 3). Asek amplified the comic situation about Darione's previous mistake – of 'killing birds.' Here learning takes the form of interactive playfulness. When playfulness is not a reduced to a programmed activity in a classroom it takes on a life of itself own in learning discourse; it becomes a space which seems to know no limit other than those determined by learners' voices. Owing to playfulness, group talk creates a functional flexible context around knowledge in construction where, comically and figuratively, 'confusion' is allowed; '*birds are killed*' and '*sunflower is considered a leaf*' provided the sunflower becomes '*a plant with broad leaves.*'

The present study shows that playfulness is also used as a comic relief, a digression, often to mark the end of extensive and difficult discussions, and to signify transition in discussion. Underlying such playfulness are learners' effort reinforces group camaraderie, and empowers each other's creative voice as they construct understandings of knowledge. Having successfully resolved a series of confusing equations, Delphine and Aury parody 'self-congratulations,' a traditional classroom practice of acknowledging learners' effort at the end of a given task:

1. **Delphine:** Clap for Delphine nah (for providing all the answers needed)"
2. **Aury:** "Clap for m::e" (*laughter*)
3. **Delphine:** "Clap for you that what? (meaning, for what reason do you deserve a clap) What have you done? 'Clap for y::ou' (*mimicking Aury*). What is the next question?

"Clap for..." evokes reward and encourage teaching practices at foundational states of learning, as a way of encouraging learner's participation. The difference here lies in the implied irony. Firstly, learners are not in a classroom situation; and secondly the call to "clap for..." unlike in a classroom setting, is self-addressed; Delphine herself says "clap for *Delphine*." So does Aury herself in line 2, with a tone of laughter. The dialogue ends with Delphine's playful sarcasm as she mimics Aury before drawing attention to the next task. A characteristic feature of a parody is that it empties an official symbol of its significance, which is the essence of the *carnavalesque* experience. Through their voices girded with humour and playfulness, learners can de-crown the authoritative voice of the classroom and its monologic claim to legitimate knowledge as they construct their own understanding of knowledge. It is a process of mutual voice-empowerment made possible by group talk.

Sometimes, playfulness, jokes and laughter are not directly related to the construction of understanding, yet they still play a role in shaping the contexts from which meaning emerges. Learners themselves perceive playfulness as forms of psychological relief from the pressure derived from intense, academic discussions. For example, during a group activity, Tambe, conscious of the presence of an active recording device in the room, appealed to his peers in Pidgin-English:

“Plea::se, kindly pause the recording device. Let’s get silly, lest we ‘die’
(of intense concentration)”

rCUIBa4, 4th year Student in School of Business, 23 March 2015

Though perceived in light of the unavoidable consequences of participant observation research, Tambe’s request suggest playfulness is essentially part of informal collaborative learning. Group talk is a space where silliness is allowed because it keeps learners ‘alive’ and embodied as they construct their understanding of knowledge. This socialisation process reinforces learner’s freedom, creativity and self-actualisation in the sociological context in which learning occurs. This is similar to other instances where playful interactions appear to be unrelated to the construction of knowledge. In fact, throughout the data, participants often deviate from effort to construct understanding to engage in extensive discussions about the subjects and topics that are completely unrelated to knowledge. For example, in rUBa2, Roland triggers a seven minutes and twenty-five seconds digression on European football just by mentioning ‘football’ in his attempt to hasten up Yvy, who had been talking hesitantly by making elaborate use of long pauses in his statement on disciplinary knowledge:

Roland: Yvy, massa, ‘please, hasten up, tonight is football night. I need to be in front of the television screen by 7:59pm for the 8:00pm football match. That game cannot be missed.

Egbe: Who is playing today?

Yvy: [Did you watch] the game of last night?

rUBa2, First Year Accounting Students, 20 March 2015 at 5:58 pm

A chat about football has nothing to do with *Accounting*, their course of studies, but for several minutes it becomes, the centre of conversation. But within the informal space, ten seconds of temporary distraction and laughter reinforce the role of emotions and affect in cognition (Tanis, 2012), which are vital in the exercise of critical thinking (Danvers, 2016).

Bakhtin’s *Carnavalesque* provides the theoretical basis for the understanding of the role of playfulness orchestrated by learners’ voices as a radical open environment for learning. Learners’ voices are positioned in terms of playful self-congratulations, playful

sarcasm and counter-sarcasm, exemplifying ways in which students in Cameroon universities obtain licence to explore, reinforce and apply understandings and knowledge which they themselves construct. As learners mimic, parody and ridicule each other's voices, utterances, and authoritative knowledge, they mutually grant themselves licence to explore, construct, de-construct, and re-construct knowledge according to the expectations of their academic, social and cultural communities. In other words, playful socialisation in discussion grants learners the licence to risk and explore the social and cultural relevance of their constructed understanding of knowledge.

In summary, the extract below serves as an example of how learners perceive the relevance of playful distractions to the construction of knowledge. Occupying and opened sitting space along a foot path on campus, Ojong, Agbor and three other students are discussing Sociology and Anthropology, when another student walks by, recognises Ojong and then stops for a friendly chat; obviously, interrupting group activity. After a brief exchange with Ojong and other members of the group, the visiting student walks away. Agbor then reinitiates discussions as follows, addressing last speaker in figurative language:

1. **Agbor:** "You were saying something before the fly fell into the wine" (*Outburst of giggles and laughter from peers*)
2. **Ojong:** " [Do not worry] the fly had no effect on our wine; in fact, we are going to stir that fly. It is going to serve as an ingredient "
(*More laughter*)
3. **Agbor:** "You know it [the fly] has a purpose. Like an African and a good anthropologist, you should know these things"

UBa3 (Third Year Students in Sociology and Anthropology student)

16th March 2015 Segment 23:39 mins onward

Metaphors are difficult to translate out of the context in which they are used. They can only be described. The images of *fly* and *wine* are vivid and concrete, relating to everyday life around the tropical regions of Africa: Palm wine, in particular, is used to entertain guests at social gatherings. At the same time, because of its sweet taste, palm wine attracts flies; and very often a fly might fall into an opened glass of palm wine, disrupt-

ing the pleasurable drinking experience. So Agbor's utterance is a metaphoric interpretation of the disruption of their group talk caused by the peer who had just passed by. Moreover, using another figurative language, Ojong further expands the metaphor of the fly and the wine: *the fly will be stirred, like an ingredient*. The meaning is that the unfortunate situation of the fly falling into the wine will be turned into an advantage. 'The fly will be stirred, like and ingredient' is ironic because a fly cannot become an ingredient to wine, just as a disruption cannot affect learning. But as Agbor insists, there is a purpose to every fly which falls into a glass of wine, just as there is a purpose to every interruption in group learning; the meanings of the metaphor ought to be obvious to learners who position themselves as *African anthropologists* in the making.

This segment illustrates how learners, through their voices, creatively make use of playfulness and disruptions to construct their understanding of knowledge. Through Agbor's voice, it further reveals learners' awareness of the intricate but beneficial interplay between the construction of their understanding of knowledge, and the contingent and sometimes disruptive factors from which constructed knowledge draws social and cultural relevance.

6.2.3 Voice and Identities: Gender, Professional and Spiritual Identities

Established discourses on social and cultural identities are never neutral (Bourdieu, 1991), neither are the voices by which learners position themselves in different discourses. Nonetheless, voices mediate, translate, and enact shared understandings of social and cultural representations as understood within the contexts in which they are used (Bakhtin, 1981). The implied social and cultural world of learners' voices is pointed to by concrete aspects of language (Wortham & Locher, 1996: p. 560) - which indicate ways in which learners' through their voices position themselves in relation to their sociocultural world in Cameroon. This present study identifies three main features or representations of the sociocultural world that undergird learners' voices in Cameroon universities: that is their *gender*, *professional* and *spiritual* identities.

6.2.3.1 Voice and Gender

Learners' voices, captured in group talk, did not focus on gender relations or presentations. Analysis of meta-discourse exchanges on gender during focus group interview,

however, provides insight on how learners' position themselves within sociocultural representations of gender. For example, a student (Janet) who has been conducting group talk with five boys for close to three years recounts how it feels to be the only female student in her learning group:

((*laughs*)) "...it feels okay. It doesn't trouble me being the only girl. Maybe at the beginning it did. My studies first. If they can help me pass my exams the way I want, why should not study with them? "

UB3 Accounting Student - Focus Group Interview 23th February 2015 at 7:01pm

Although her laughter may undercut her claim that gender did not matter – it suggests slight embarrassment, even though she claims that gender should not be an obstacle. So, from her voiced perspective, gender differentiation does not stand in the way of learning; more important than her gendered-identity in the group, are considerations about the benefit of the group with respect to her academic performance. On the contrary, Mohamed, as male peer considers gender differentiation a key factor in the constitution of groups and an important determinant in group performance.

"If the group was made up only of boys, they can get to a point [...] they might get into an aside and get off topic from what they were doing. But if it [the group] were made up of boys and girls, a girl can say 'we are having a target.' For example, football. Boys like football. A girl will be feeling bored. She is going to say stop that thing and concentrate [...] when we will be talking about Spanish football league..."

So, within the same group, while Janet assumes a neutral position on the gender discourse based on her perceived learning interest. Mohamed, based on the same academic interest motivation, positions gender differently and attributes to it a functional role i.e. what is expected of it within a learning group. In his view Janet is expected to play the role of one who 'feels bored' when boys engage in 'boys' talk,' and is supposed to be responsible for admonishing the group to re-focus and concentrate on their initial study objective. In other words, Mohamed does not just position Janet as one who does not like football, being a girl; but he attributes to her a gender related role of keeping the boys focused. Perhaps Janet herself is not aware of the socially and culturally constructed role she is given in the group, or might, though aware, not feel 'bothered' about

it, provided ‘they’ (boys) help her pass her exams. However, this suggests strong social and cultural underpinning of how learners in Cameroon universities construct their understandings of gender roles and identities. It echoes empirical research conducted in Tanzania and Ghana which have also shown that discursive attempts at gender mainstreaming do not always preclude the sexist undercurrents, expressed in discourses, activities and processes which either challenge or reinforce roles expected of female learners within cultural contexts (Morley *et al.*, 2009; Morley, 2010). Within higher education gender differentiations, inclusions and exclusions, are often more complex and present more paradoxes than they might appear to (Morley & David 2009, also Morley, 2011; 2014). Learners’ voices position them directly within sociocultural representations of gender, as is the case with Mohamed, for whom football is a ‘boys’ thing’; or indirectly, as with the case of Janet herself who, through her own voice, indirectly identifies with such representations, considering other interests and socially constructed motivations.

Another segment illustrates more explicitly how patronising gender roles are insidiously constructed. This can be observed below in utterances of Freddy, Astid and Mohamed:

1. **Freddy:** “[she is woman-girl!]”
2. **Astid:** “[we consider her] like the princess of the whole group.
We call her ‘*Lorlor*’- meaning ‘*the Queen*.’ ((laughter))
3. **Mohammed:** “We take care of her, we protect her (...) we always walk her home. When we go out, three of them will go down, two of us will go up.”

Freddy’s introductory exclamation that ‘she (Janet) is a ‘*woman-girl*’ is an English language feminisation of a chauvinistic expression, ‘*man-boy*’, commonly used in Pidgin-English to describe and acclaim a male hero, whose actions in each situation reflect admirable attributes of manliness as constructed and understood within that particular culture. Hence, the construct ‘*she is a woman-girl*,’ though intended as a compliment,

ironically conceal a patronising endorsement of Janet's role in the group which is culturally constructed and conditioned, in relation to feminising or even misogynistic expectations within the Cameroonian context.

This is equally true about the honours of '*lorlor*' – meaning '*queen*' – given her by her peers. The role of a queen within the culture as well as the social privileges and obligations involved, calls for further enquiry. Mohammed in line 3 uses verbs that express tenderness, nurturing and protection to position the collective voice of the groups with socially expected responsibilities towards Janet by illustrating how she is going to be walked home.

From a Bakhtinian perspective, the construct of 'figured worlds' (Wortham & Locher, 1996; Vagan, 2012) has been developed to show that language, words and characters that express voices do not develop from a vacuum. Presupposed cultural knowledge, events and characters and roles constitute the backdrop against which voices are orchestrated (Vagan, 2012, p. 48). As such, 'woman-girl' and '*Lorlor*' are figurative expressions of learners' voices as they position themselves around Janet's gendered self.

In all, based on observation of group interactions, study groups seemed indiscriminately constituted in terms of gender. Groups were generally gender inclusive; though it was obvious that groups which congregated at individual learner's living spaces in hostels tended not to be as gender inclusive as groups that gathered regularly in public places or on campus. Nonetheless, learners' voices tended either directly or indirectly to reflect presupposed cultural knowledge or representations underlying interactional positioning of learners in Cameroon universities.

6.2.3.2 Voice and Professional Identity

As seen above (6.2.1) voice is power. The present study reveals that through their voices, learners are involved in negotiating power relations that add currency to knowledge, with far reaching social and cultural implications within the Cameroonian society. The power of knowing provides the basis of learners' sense of identity as related to their area of learning. Analysis of discourse also reveals that in addition to

power, learners in group talk, also use their voices to position themselves in relation to social and cultural roles that are congruent with the Cameroon contexts.

Data drawn from Group Observation Portfolio 2 of UB3 reports the observation of a session involving five students from the department of accounting; all facing the chalk board on which what appears to be a financial statement of a company had been laid out. The group task consisted of learners guiding one of their peers through an accounting exercise involving the financial report that had been laid out on the chalkboard. As different participants made contributions towards the task, occasionally, the word '*Nkondengui!*' was used in a playful manner, often accompanied by laughter or by fierce opposition and counter-arguments. During a focus group interview, a learner dwelled on the meaning of '*nkondengui*':

'Nkondengui is the name of the maximum-security prison in Cameroon where embezzlers of public funds are locked up. Sometimes they are not even guilty. A little accounting mistake can send someone there for a long time. An accountant must be very meticulous. Any error on paper can land him or others in *nkondengui*. *Nkondengui* is the award you get in accounting for your errors.

UBa3-FG Third Year Accounting Students, 10th February 2015

It is obvious that learners' voices in this segment are moving beyond perceived assessment demands of the classroom. Through their voices, learners in this extract are involved in the process of enacting and ventriloquising professional voices and roles associated with accounting practices in Cameroon. This draws close to Pryor and Crossouard's (2007: p.17) view that learning necessarily involves a socio-cultural component that every learner is called to reckon with, and that goes beyond mere pedagogic interactions. In fact, every learner must wrestle with fundamental issues about who they are and how they position themselves within constructed professional identities and how these identities relate to wider social structures. More than a playful refrain, *nkongdengui*, is a recognition; a claim of learners' voices, on the sociocultural representation of the core of professional accountants in Cameroon. Informal, collaborative, study groups in Cameroon universities seem a viable starting point that provide learners with the opportunity to position their voices in some of the social-formative struggle associated with accounting, in ways that are relevant within social, historic and cultural

context of Cameroon.

Group talk provides the dialogic licence involved, which enables learners to ventriloquise perceived professional representations embodied by their current learning experiences. Drawing from her life experience, Angela, a second-year student in Special Education, narrates her experience:

I am studying a programme called 'Special Education.' I must tell you that it is thanks to this group that I knew what special education means. This was when I became handicapped due to a fracture that I had. Members of this group took turns to push me around, making sure that I had everything. I don't remember missing any lecture notes at that time. They even took turns to type my assignment for me.

rUB3 Faculty of Education Sciences, Department of Special Education, 13th March 2015

In Angela's understanding of 'special education,' her professional voice is constructed by concrete, sociocultural experiences, inspired by other learners' voices and orchestrated by their actions of benevolence towards her when she was physically incapacitated.

6.2.3.3 Voice and Spiritual Identity

Data from this present study also reveal that learners in group talk are drawn to a unifying, holistic representation of their experiences as learners in Cameroon, and they position their voices meta-discursively to that end through rituals that are meaningful to them. It is to this form of sociocultural representation that I attribute the term '*spiritual*;' a little different but not opposed to its strictly religious sense. Here, *spiritual* refers to a journey towards wholeness of experience (Tisdell, 2008), and involves unconscious processes about how individuals make meaning of ultimate reality (Fowler, 1981).

Of frequent occurrence throughout the data, for example, are instances where group members, either collectively or individually, carry out specific rites and rituals before they start learning, which are not related to the academic content of knowledge discussed. Data set rUB2 for instance, contains an observation carried out as two students

from the Faculty of Law went about campus in search of an empty room, to study *Contract Law*. Once settled inside a quiet lecture hall, they prayed together. The ritual lasted for about 6:05 minutes, after which they each walked to separate corners of the room to revise their individual notes. The discourse of the prayers, as spontaneously formulated by a learner, was indistinctly recorded. However, excerpts reveal that it was essentially formulated in the first person plural pronoun ‘we,’ and random keywords that stood out were:

(...) ‘together,’ ‘success,’ ‘deliver,’ ‘courage,’ ‘remember,’ ‘thank you,’

rUB2 First Year Students in Faculty of Law, 8th February 2015 at 7:45pm

If one were to consider prayer as discourse in its own right, with its language as vocalised by group members subject to analysis, it would express ideas of community and togetherness. For words like ‘*together*’, ‘*we*,’ and ‘*openness to an-other*:’ ‘*remember*,’ ‘*deliver*,’ ‘*thank you*,’ are used as the frame of reference in which individual voices are positioned and given licence to pursue learning beyond the confines of perceived learning outcomes. This provides learners with the privileged position of situating their experiences of learning within a wider sociocultural framework of meaning and understanding, in relation to ultimate reality. There is always the need and the possibility in discourse to ‘see-across-fields,’ and size up meaning. Wortham and Locher, 1996: p.565) talks about the ‘God’s-eye-view’ perspective in discourse which provides ultimate perspective and meaning to reality and events.

The role of spirituality in education, is developed within holistic theories of knowledge and learning, which offer an integrative framework between cognition, feelings and behaviours in learning (Gallagher *et al.* 2007). Critical Africa pedagogy considers spirituality, the quest for ultimate meaning, as part of the African identity or authentic self (Nkeze, 2007) which transcends social, cultural and religious affinities. Photo #10 shows a group of students in a position of spiritual communion and devotion at the end of a learning activity.



Space of Informal Learning as spiritual 2

Photo #10: Five Fourth Year Accounting Students in position of reverence and devotion, 09th February at 8:48pm

Tchoumbou-Ngantchop© (2015)

In a subsequent focus group interview, prompted about the religious diversity and various religious sensitivities involved in the group, Mohammed, who positions himself as a Muslim, explains:

It depends who is praying. There are Catholics here. She is a Protestant (*(pointing at a female peer)*); he is Pentecostal; I am Muslim. When it is my turn I pray like a Muslim and everyone follows; when it is his turn [...] just like that. We have another colleague who claims that he believes in the religion of his fathers. When it is his turn we all observe a moment of silence. The most important is that we all raise our minds to God who is present in every religion.

It can be affirmed, then, that when learners come together to learn, the individual and collective positioning of their voices allows them to compose and frame their understanding in a holistic manner, through the sociocultural representations of Cameroonian society.

6.3 Conclusion

Beside the pedagogic value of group talk, as learners' voice constructs their understanding of knowledge, they also embody the social and cultural representations of their context of learning. These representations are not pre-established but are constructed alongside knowledge itself. Hence, upon analysis, learners' voices as positioned within group talk reveal characteristic features of the context in which understandings of knowledge are constructed and grant relevance. For learners in Cameroon, this includes power relations as enacted and experienced in socialising. It also involves representative features of gendered, professional and spiritual identities of learners as constructed and actualised by learners' voices, strategically positioned in discussions.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“TO SHADE AND FIBER, MILK AND MEMORY”

DISCUSSIONS, REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

The main question of this research is: how does informal collaborative learning influence students' learning experiences at Cameroonian universities and contribute to their perceived learning outcomes? In chapter five of the present thesis, discourse on informal collaborative learning activity is analyzed. Attention is drawn to contributions of group talk to learning outcomes as perceived by students themselves. In chapter six, informal collaborative learning is assessed with respect to the social and cultural contexts within which higher education occurs in the Cameroon setting. In this chapter, key findings from the preceding chapters are used to address the following sub-research questions of this thesis:

- a) Why do students in Cameroonian universities engage in informal collaborative learning?
- b) What is the pedagogic value of student talk in an informal learning environment?
- c) How does informal collaborative learning in Cameroonian universities help students achieve objectives that they consider specific and valuable to their learning?
- d) What are the sociocultural features of informal collaborative learning in Cameroonian universities?

This is followed by a synopsis of what this research adds to the existing body of knowledge on the subject and subsequently by an analysis of the relevance of this contribution to higher education teaching and planning in a culturally diverse yet globalizing world. Hence, the key findings are elaborated from the perspectives of stakeholders, including higher education policy makers, higher education pedagogy in general and from my personal perspective as a professional educator in the Cameroonian higher education system. The last section presents a reflection on the entire research and proposes avenues for subsequent research.

7.2 Key Findings

7.2.1 Informal Collaborative Learning as Dialogic Space

Sub-question (a): Why do students in Cameroonian universities engage in informal collaborative learning?

In practice, small group activities intensify at the end of each semester, when learners prepare for summative evaluations of their learning. Therefore, summative assessment, in general, provides the immediate motivation and sets the stage for informal group learning activities. Learners themselves articulate the benefits of informal collaborative learning in terms of the added value that these groups bring to their learning experiences. So, in fact, students in Cameroon universities are drawn to group talks and group learning activities because of the talking spaces that these groups provide. Through talk, informal learning groups create a physical and epistemological space in which learners actualise their voices and through their voices actualize themselves within their learning communities. As such, learners perceive these learning spaces as embodying their academic expectations, and holds promises for the construction of understanding of knowledge in ways that formal classroom setting would not.

Spaces which are created for group talk are beyond any geographical location, as Bongyong affirms during a focus group interviews:

We have no ideal meeting place. We can meet anywhere and anytime. We just have to agree that let us meet there and we meet. Let us meet here and we meet. Sometimes we do not even plan it. You meet few students solving and you join them. When you are tired, you go...

CUIB2 (Level 300 student, School of Business) Focus group interview 14th March 2015

So, group talk can occur in a classroom (Photo #1), usually out of school hours and vicinity, just as it can occur in the most recessive corners in students' hostels; in the intimacy of their bedrooms, as well as during the most unusual hours of the day.



Photo #11: Informal Group Learning activity in a university classroom

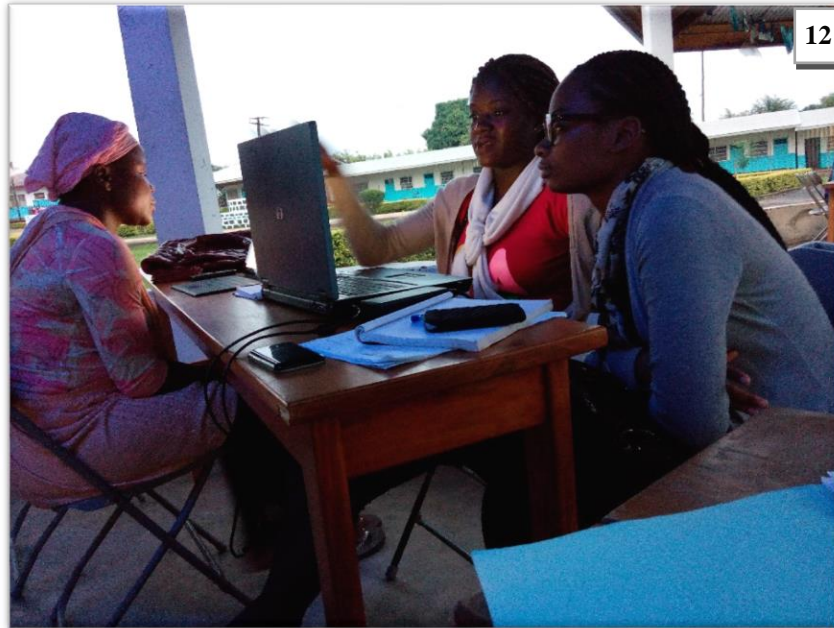
Space of Informal Learning 3

Tchoumbou-Ngantchop© (2015)

Theoretically, the heuristic construction of an alternate space of learning is not foreign to literature that explores structure and agency in learning. For example, the concept of *third space* has been used to analyse adult learning environments, particularly as a space of ‘resistance’ which learners create for themselves within formal classroom activities (Gramsci, 1971; Giroux, 1983; Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1996; Tikly, 1999; Moje *et al.*, 2004; Benson, 2010). The space of informal collaborative learning is a space of dialogue; a space where multiple voices emerge and clash, and in that process, contribute in generating meaningful and relevant learning outcomes. Soja (1996) characterizes space as the possibility of a non-hegemonic otherness, drawing from Foucault’s concept of *heterotopia* (Foucault, 1971: p.61).

From a Bakhtinian perspective, space originates and is sustained by voices; *heteroglossic*-multiple voices of learners which otherwise would not have emerged in discourse. However, once created by learners’ voices the space of group talk takes on a life of its own, not just as a third sociolinguistic space, but as a dynamic voice in itself which actualizes the polyphony of learners’ voices as they construct understandings of knowledge. The space of dialogue and of collaboration then makes a meaningful and relevant contribution to discourse within the contexts of learning in which it occurs. So, primarily, a student in the Cameroon universities system voluntarily engages in informal collaborative learning to find his or her voice/s as these voices continually seek

ways of actualizing themselves within academic community to which students are enrolled. Alongside massive university classrooms where individual learners' voices are easily submerged by institutional strategies and practices that intend to cope with limited resources such as infrastructures, learners see in informal group talk an opportunity to individually contribute, through their own voices, in constructing their understanding of knowledge (Picture 12).



Space of Informal Learning 4

Photo #12: Three students make use of one computer in resolving a physics equation
Tchoumbou-Ngantchop© (2015)

7.2.2 Learner as Voice: The Pedagogic Relevance of Group Talk

Two sub research questions of this thesis evoke the pedagogic relevance of informal collaborative learning. Firstly, *what is the pedagogic value of student talk in an informal learning environment?* And secondly, *how does informal collaborative learning in Cameroonian universities help students achieve objectives that they consider specific and valuable to their learning?* Based on the analysis carried out in the previous chapter, both questions address processes by which the space of group talk contributes to learning.

When students in Cameroon come together to learn, the assumption is that by talking about course content based on specific assessment demands, they also fulfil the specific learning objectives of courses. It is on this ground that students themselves perceive group talk as beneficial to learning and a necessary determinant of success to their university experience. Nonetheless, the ability to talk through academic knowledge does not necessarily imply valuable or effective learning. Recitation and repetition is a form of talking often associated with very low cognition. In fact, features of recitation, rote learning and strong converging expressions of knowledge are part of most, if not all, group talks observed in the present study. For this reason, some school of thought might consider the cognitive level of discussions to be very low. For example, in a similar study, Christian and Talanquer (2012) consider the benefit of self-initiated group talk to be minimal, based on low level cognition. In their view, founded on their analysis of study groups involving organic chemistry students in North America, unsupervised group talk is not a viable space for the effective construction of content knowledge. The implied conclusion of their research is that only in the classroom, and through discussions regulated by the teacher, is content knowledge constructed in a way that builds up and regulate learners' understanding. Christian and Talanquer's (2012) analysis of students' talk leads to the conclusion that interactions among peers outside of classrooms are inefficient and often focus on low cognitive processes rather than on meaningful learning. Although conducted in the United States the research of these authors seems to echo most research findings about pedagogies in the south, particularly on Sub-Saharan Africa where most research on teaching and learning is often presented as remedial to the low level of learning, occurring in dysfunctional institutions. Based on this understanding, group talk as carried out by learners in Cameroon universities has a limited effect on learning; since at first sight, they consist in verbalizing that knowledge which is already constructed within the classroom.

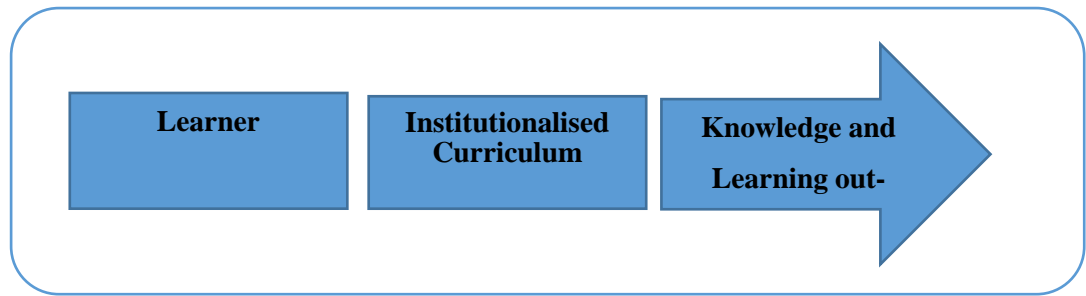


Figure 6: Content Focused Learning

However, assessing the quality of learning in group talk solely from the perspective of content knowledge seems to undermine the significance of individual and collective learners' voices. For, it is not solely the construction or even the reconstruction of knowledge that gives value to group talk. But as observed in Cameroon universities, talk allows learners actualise their understanding of knowledge. Hence, through their voices, learners are involved not just in the construction of knowledge but, and more importantly, in the construction of appropriate understanding of knowledge per learning expectations which they themselves perceive to be meaningful. This claim assumes that learners do not necessarily perceive and respond to learning discourse as intended by the institutional curricula. For, as Guliker et al. (2008) argue, learning strategies often depend primarily on learner perception and agentic understanding of the implications of learning outcomes as framed by the context of their learning. Thus, as shown in the previous chapter of the present research, it is not the construction of measurable knowledge alone that make learning valuable. Students primarily engage in learning through their dialogic voices which embody both *what* they know and *how* they know what they know. Learners' voices, emerging in dialogue, provides the context which gives meaning to all content knowledge.

Thus, while the construction and the reconstruction of knowledge are important aspect that make group talk valuable, individual learners' construction of their understanding of knowledge is no less important, for it involves the embodiment of the contexts in which knowledge is being presented. More than content knowledge, learners' voices seem to give more access to how, in their given context, learners navigate institutional

discourses to achieve perceived learning objectives. Learning occurs as learners position their individual and collective voices in ways that best construct understandings of knowledge. It involves learners' ability to let their voice emerge, embodying the contextually relevant attributes of learning; confidence with which they possess to express knowledge, and the examples that they themselves generate to illustrate understandings, and their creative attempts in applying knowledge where necessary.

Figure 7 below illustrates the dynamic interaction between learners' voices and scientific knowledge as related to specific learning outcomes. As learners position their voices both in relation to each other and in relation to scientific knowledge and learning expectations, a dynamic circle of dialogue is created, a *dialogic circle*, in which the spiraling of voices bring meaning to knowledge; and knowledge in turn continually empower learners' voices. Voice and knowledge feed off each other, and ushers each other into existence.

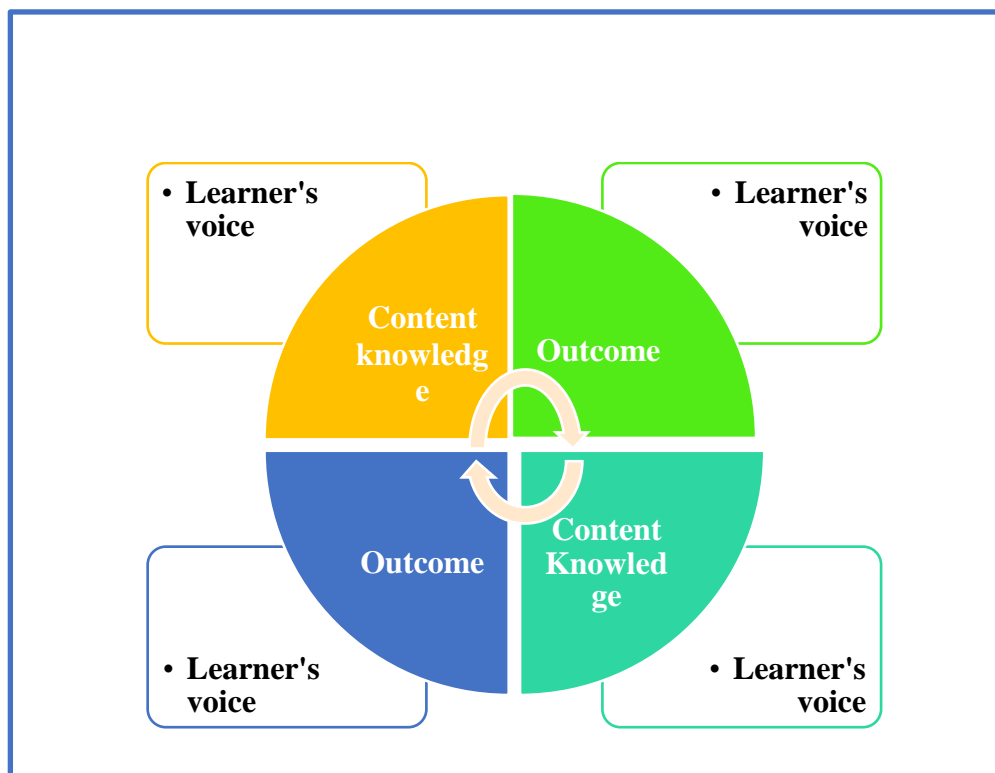


Figure 7: Dialogic Circle

In Bakhtinian terminology, the *dialogic circle* corresponds to the hermeneutical space of the *carnival* which provides learners with the license to explore knowledge through

their different roles and voices. This dialogic space is accessed through a detour – a *dialogic detour* (Figure 8) from the absolute authority of constructed knowledge. The dialogic detour which allows learners, through their voices, to *un-crowned*, *de-throned* and *re-throned*, *de-constructed* and *re-constructed* knowledge and understandings of knowledge, based on learning expectations which they perceive, at a particular time and place, to be relevant to their learning.

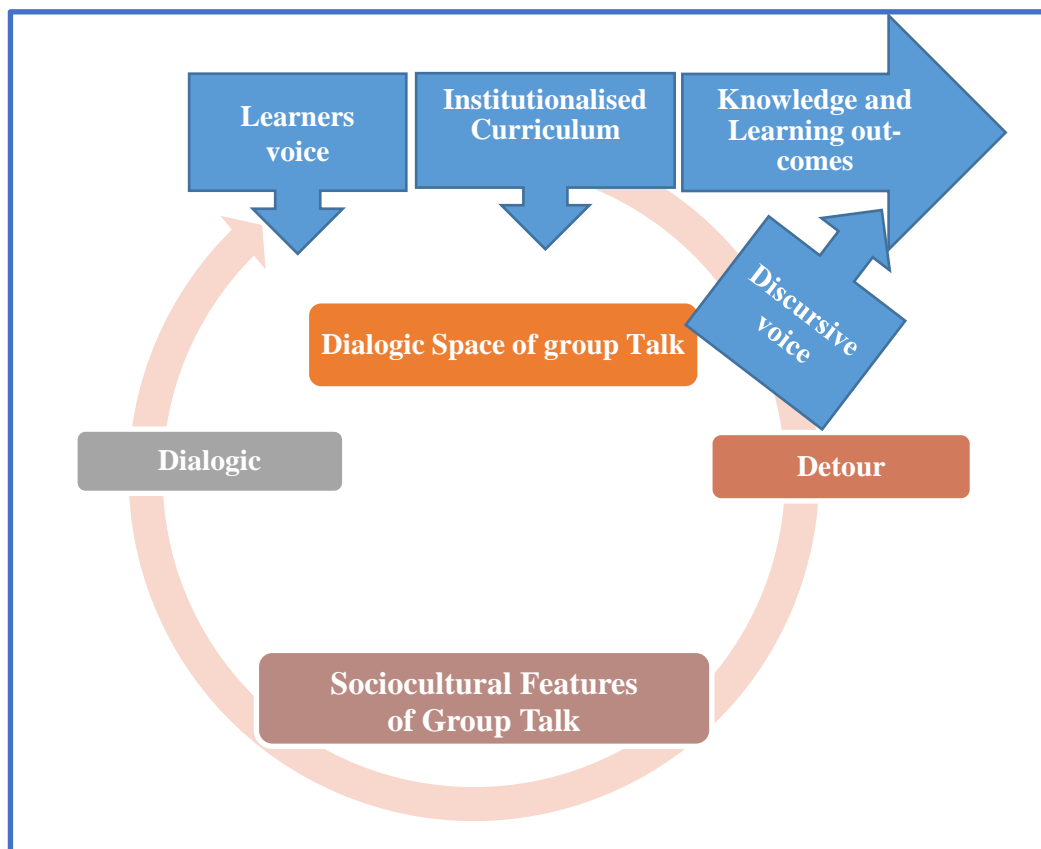


Figure 8: Dialogic Detour

Analysis of group talk reveals several ways through which informal collaborative learning helps students to *de-institutionalize* learning, and so achieve objectives that are specific to their expected learning outcomes and that are relevant to their context of learning. A summary of related analysis here provides answers to the third sub-research question: *how does informal collaborative learning in Cameroon universities help students achieve objectives that they consider specific and valuable to their learning?*

Firstly, learners position their voices in discourse in relation to anticipated assessment demands. In fact, the dialogic detour that is enabled by group talk for learners in Cameroon is often prompted by specific assessment practices. Learners spend considerable time discussing assessment tasks, procedures, processes and praxis in their institution. While the precise nature of the relationship between assessment and learning outcomes in literature is yet to be established, learners' perception of assessment practices is an important variable in how learning occurs.

In as earlier smaller-scale research, I investigated student teachers' perceptions of assessment in teacher training programmes in Cameroon, and how such perceptions contribute to their learning. Already, findings at the time suggested that institutions and teachers perceive assessment practices differently from the way they are perceived by students (Tchoumbou-Ngantchop, 2009). These findings are in line with Guliker *et al.* (2008), who points out that:

teachers use assessment to send a message to students about what kind of learning is required, but students' perceptions of this message is not always in line with teacher's intention (...) students create their own 'hidden curriculums'; they interpret the learning environment and assessment practices in their own ways, which in turn drives their learning (p. 403)

Based on teachers' experiences of learning in Cameroon, teacher training programmes take place in the pedagogic space between teachers' expectations and learners' 'hidden curriculums,' that is their perceptions of such expectations. Learning interventions which claim to promote learning ought to seek to narrow the gap between these two perceptions. Similarly, analysis in the previous chapters suggests that group talk allows learners' voices to emerge and bridge the gap between assessment demands and their individual learners' agendas inspired by expected learning outcomes. Through exploratory learning processes and the clashing of voices and roles, the dialogic space of group talk grants to learners' voices the license to bridge the formative gap between assessment demands as perceived by learners and expected learning outcomes.

In the dialogic space, learners focus on the divergent understandings of each voice or utterance. More than in a formal classroom setting, where the single voice of a teacher is often solely responsible in sustaining dialectic tension between converging (*if* they

know) and diverging perspectives (*what* they know) of knowledge (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Torrance & Pryor, 1998; Pryor & Crossouard, 2007), the informal dialogic space is *pluri-vocal*. In it, there are different voices and roles representing different ways of knowing and thus, co-creating subtly different understanding of the construction of knowledge. The dialogic space provides each learner with the possibility of voicing ‘*what*’ they know amid other voices, and the opportunity to ventriloquise and embody the different roles that are with reach of their voices. In the dialogic space, voicing or articulating is ‘*what*’ is known is closely related to knowledge itself. A learner makes the following request to her peer: “*please let me try to explain so that it can also enter my brain*” (UBv2 Second Year Students in Agriculture. Video recorded on 01st March 2015, 30:03 minutes onward). Learning consists, then, in ventriloquising propositional and scientific knowledge until learners’ voices begin to emerge as part of the relevant knowledge in the context in which it is received.

One other way in which group talk helps students achieve objectives that are specific to their learning is through the regulatory, metacognitive processes involved in constructing meaningful knowledge. Excerpts of group discussions show that such awareness is intrinsically wedded to every learning interaction through learners’ responsiveness. In the dialogic space, each utterance is a form of response to a voice in performance; often a strategic response that has the function of positioning its subject’s voice in ongoing discussion. The recursive movement between the ongoing discussion and the strategic and regulated responses involving learners in their different voices and roles seems to be one of the main causes of effective learning in informal collaborative learning.

Lastly, learners’ critical engagement with knowledge is another way by which informal group talk helps university learners achieve specific and relevant learning objectives. While studies have highlighted the relevance of context in achieving critical thinking objectives in universities, they have often dwelled on the structural and institutional component of critical thinking. For example, a doctoral research on criticality in Ghanaian state university classrooms suggests that lecturers be supported in their efforts to design and implement teaching techniques that promote criticality Amua-Sekyi’s (2011). This is feasible, but remains a far-fetched reality due to lack of investment in

resources that are necessary for institution-wide changes. In the meantime, class sizes (Photo #13) and continuous pressure on lecturers diminishes chances for the critical acquisition of academic literacies through formal teaching spaces.



Massive Classroom

Photo #13: 90° view of Second Year Course in Political Sciences, 31st March 2015 at 17:41pm
Tchoumbou-Ngantchop© (2015)

Moreover, beyond established conclusions students are willing to extend their thinking, by developing more sophisticated and innovative expressions of knowledge in relation to perceived assessment demands. The informal and convivial atmosphere of learning interactions allows for affective learning experiences with creativity and purposefulness (Danvers, 2016).



14

Space of Informal Learning 5

Photo: Small Group Talk, Year Two Students in Agriculture. 24th March 2015
Tchoumbou-Ngantchop © (2015)

From a cognitive point of view then, informal group talk provides the necessary framework which allows learners, both individually and collectively, to make the most of university learning. Nonetheless, learning does not occur in a social vacuum; every form of learning, in as much as it is related to a historic context is a sociocultural experience (Vygotsky, 1976; Wenger, 1998). This has implications for how learners develop their sense of identities and position themselves in their respective communities.

7.2.3 The Learner in Discourse: Sociocultural Features of Group Learning

Utterances about knowledge are never neutral, because voices themselves are not. The previous chapter discusses knowledge as expressed by learners' voices. It highlights that learner's voices are interweaved with sociocultural features, which directly related to the specific context of Cameroon and give relevance or added value to expected learning outcomes. Here, the fourth sub-research question is addressed: *What are the sociocultural features of informal collaborative learning in Cameroonian universities?*

Sociocultural theorists relate learning to context through generalizing structural presuppositions and cultural ideologies (Mercer & Howe, 2012). However, understood from within the dialogic space, the relationship between learners' voices and the sociocultural features which add relevance to knowledge is not pre-established, but is always in progress of being constructed together with understandings of knowledge. In fact, such features are established not based on any forms of sociocultural categorization that have been predefined. Rather, they are established based on learners' voices as positioned in discourse regarding the relevance of knowledge within a context. As such, emerging voices, utterances and discourses on knowledge embody the social, cultural and spiritual heritage of learners involved.

Analysis in the previous chapter revealed a few sociocultural features that underlie learning in Cameroon universities and, to a certain extent, guarantee its relevance. Firstly, voice and power are closely related in the discourse of group learning in Cameroon. Voices embody power; in as much as it is through their voices that learners appropriate and interiorize, challenge and subvert power relations, as exercised within their respective groups and within the wider academic community to which they belong. Institutional knowledge is perceived as knowledge that empowers and grants access to the wider academic community and transforms learners' individual voices into emerging voices of power. The clashing of voices within the dialogic space of group talk embodies power in its different manifestations and counter-manifestations, as experienced in the wider community from which knowledge derives its relevance. Power, for example, is used both to support hegemonic ideologies underlying the use of English and French in Cameroon and as a medium by which creative freedom is expressed within the *pluri*-lingual and *pluri*-cultural nature of the Cameroonian society. Learners' socialisation and playful interactions reveal the enabling framework which facilitates the positioning of voices in learning discourses, and mirrors the nature and function of social interactions as platforms of affective connectedness and creativity.

Furthermore, on the basis that language reflects human consciousness and communication (Bakhtin, 1986; Bernards-Donals, 1994), data-analysis of the language of Cameroonian students' group talk reveals that such informal learning groups are gendered communities, and participate actively in constructing gendered representations of the

community in which they are situated. They are also professional and spiritual communities because they participate in constructing and perpetuating social, cultural and spiritual representations of their communities. By its dialogic possibilities, such learning groups provide learners with the necessary and appropriate license to parody and perform either enabling or inhibiting gender roles, rooted in how power relations between genders are historically, socially and culturally constructed in the Cameroonian context (Butler, 1998). Similarly, the dialogic space of informal learning groups provides learners with live experiences of flexible relational skills that are required of them as professionals in their respective fields. The playful environment of learning allows learners to position themselves within social and professional roles associated with their discipline; they begin to embody distinctive attributes related to their university learning experiences and to social and professional identities of their disciplinary choices.

The spiritual interconnectedness of learners, as per Tisdell (2001), is one of the important ways by which learners in Cameroon universities construct knowledge and meaning. Spirituality here refers to the deep feeling of interconnectedness that some groups ritualize in the form of transcendent spiritual experiences related to a higher power. Hence, beyond their academic focus, informal group interactions, through a shared spirituality, embody a common vision of a holistic integration of the human person within the Cameroonian society.

In summary, informal collaborative learning provides learners in Cameroon universities with a voice with which they negotiate access to the discursive academic communities to which they belong. Analogically, Brathewaite's (1993) sociolinguistic theory on the formation of Caribbean languages can be used to illustrate the formation of group talk as a voice in discourse. Like African languages, which historically were refused existence alongside the official European languages in the Caribbean, individual learners' voices can be considered as despised under the official, authoritative discourse of learning in Cameroon universities. Institutional discourses, by default, tend to submerge learners' voices by subjecting them to standard institutional discourses which dominates massive lecture halls and undergird assessment practices. Nevertheless, learners' voices cannot be silenced completely. Sidelined from standard discourses, marginalized

voices, like the submergence of Afro-languages that had been trampled upon by western languages, serves an ‘inculturative purpose’ (Brathewaite, 1993: p.19). For, submerged voices, such as Afro-languages, have a history of their own; a history that emerges from what Brathewaite terms ‘*immanence*,’ that is, the ‘power within themselves,’ originating from an historical experience, where social actors had to rely on their own ‘breath pattern’ rather than on ‘paraphernalia’ (1993, p.273). Learners’ voices in the informal space, like submerged languages, are also constantly being transformed and empowered and ushered into the discursive academic communities to which they legitimately belong as university learners in a context.

7.3 Contribution to existing body of knowledge

The path of dialogism is necessarily the path of polyphony, that is, of ‘many voices’ in an ongoing process of interaction that generates new meanings, even if the latter are only provisional, subject to the influence of subsequent emerging voices (Bakhtin, 1981). So, contributions to knowledge refer to claims which this research makes, in dialogue with other academic voices, based on the unique historic, social and cultural conditions under which the research was carried out. This present study suggests the following as contribution to existing literature on teaching, learning, higher education and to social sciences.

Firstly, the concept of *informal collaborative learning* used throughout this research describes distinctive pedagogic experience in higher education. More than a semantic construct, *informal collaborative learning* refers to a distinctive pedagogic space in learning. Hitherto, there has been a lack of research, exploring the precise nature of informal collaborative groups and their relationship with learning. Christian and Talanquer (2012) studied the use of classroom interaction as a way of influencing ideas and constructing meaning, based on theories of group talk (O’Donnell, 2006; Mercer, 2000; Springer *et al.*, 1999). Informal collaborative learning, as practiced by participants of this study, captures students’ interactions and dialogue outside of the formal classroom. This research foregrounds subsequent inquiries into learners’ strategic responses to highly institutionalized learning discourses.

Informal collaborative learning is made possible through dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986) as a means by which the construction of the understanding of knowledge is possible. Based on the understanding that dialogue actualizes voices, this present research offers fresh insight on the pedagogic value of collaborative group talk. Far from describing classroom pedagogy for constructing knowledge, *collaboration* as related to informal learning represents a form of ‘knowing’ which occurs within spaces created by learners’ voices and the range of voices and roles which they inhabit in dialogue.

By theorising the notion of *dialogic detour* as space in which learners’ voices, in continuous positioning within discourse, transform and are transformed in relation to meaningful and relevant learning outcomes, this research epistemologically presents the possibility of conceptualising higher education learning in terms of spatiality. It is a space where discipline knowledge and established learning outcomes take on pedagogic and sociocultural relevance. At the least, informal collaborative learning as understood within the dialogic model provides a heuristic framework for how learners make sense of learning interactions, which allows them to express themselves freely, showing how such interactions relate to expected learning outcomes.

The focus of this thesis is not on how learner identities are formed in Cameroon universities. However, the study uses a more fluid, Bakhtinian idea of identity: learners’ multiple identities are not fixed, but rather shifting, provisional, enacted and re-enacted in the process of dialogic interaction with others. This links to Cameroonian concepts of identity, which center around the analysis of the life experiences, history and traditions of people of Cameroonian ancestry, as theorized by some African scholars. In the context of education, learners’ *sense of self(ves)* is shaped by unifying philosophies and finds expression through spirituality, solidarity, cooperation, interdependence and respect for other people (Nkeze, 2007: p.4; Biya, 1987). Inevitably, this claims for a distinctive African identity for learner needs to be confronted to other views that identities are constantly being negotiated by learners’ agentic self(ves) (Norton & Toohey, 2011; p.418), making identity an evasive concept; one that operates ‘under erasure’ (Hall, 2000: p.5).

By narrowing the basis of identity(ies) in learners' voices to the dialogic spaces, rather than in themselves or in some form of African-superstructure, this thesis builds on Bakhtin's work and identifies the need for further research into how identities are formed through informal group talk in the context of Cameroon. Informal collaborative learning thus provides an appropriate environment for the plurality of voices which, in clashing, compose the harmonious mosaic of a socio-cultural landscape that influences learners' identity(ies) in Cameroon.

An additional contribution of this study is the choice of methodology which employs digital technology and photography creatively to collect data. Visual representation of social phenomena is not a social 'mirror' (Cronin, 1998; Jerrard, 2014) but part of the process of knowledge construction by which the researcher is directly involved in every decision related to the use of digital representations. Of relevance is the innovative utilization of mobile phones, digital recording and social media to capture 'instances in action' (Nisbet & Watt, 1984; p.72) of group talk in the specific setting of Cameroonian universities. The choice to alternatively use multi-media recording devices, mobile phones and a laptop camera within the learning space enhanced approximations of the 'natural-ness' of the learning environment captured during group talk. The use of these devices within learning spaces in Cameroonian universities is prevalent today. In this ethnographic case study, the creative use of these devices however revealed methodological limitations in the 'covert' and 'overt' observation research discourse. Observational research, 'covert' and 'overt', are two ends of a continuum that regulate data collection based on the possible social and ethical consequences involved in the research (Kimmel, 1988 cited Cohen *et al.*, 2007: p. 91). This research also highlights the role of the researcher in mediating the 'covert-overt' tension involved in collecting qualitative data on the 'natural-ness' of a social phenomenon. In the case of this research, the mere presence of a researcher apparently violates the 'sacredness' of the 'informal space;' but at same time, the researcher's absence would have undoubtedly deprived data of its 'rawness' stemming from the experience of hesitant and emerging voices in contexts, and which enriches the discourse. The creative use of recording devices helped in sustaining an 'absence-presence' across data, which during transcription and analysis, allowed for a more critical and reflexive engagement with research participants. As such in this research, the 'covert-overt' is framed by my reflexivity and

critical insights which, are capable of ‘turning back on themselves’ and ‘turning back on the turning’ (Siegel, 1986: p.3).

7.4 Practical Implications of this Study

Several practical implications emerge from the research data.

7.4.1 Implication for Teaching and Learning

Collaborative learning is beneficial to student learning (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Mercer, 2012). In some contexts, as in Cameroon, collaborative learning pedagogies may also be linked to structural and logistic constraints due to the persistent problem of huge classroom sizes. In fact, universities in Cameroon, over the years, have gradually standardised collaborative learning strategies as part of university curriculum. Courses designs make provision for group collaborative learning and assessment. In fact, with massification being a major challenge to effective learning, statutory and pedagogic guidelines on teaching and learning in Cameroon universities, require institutions of higher learning to develop contextually appropriate strategies capable of stimulating effective teaching and learning in massive classrooms (MINESUP, 2015). For this reason, it is not uncommon for learners, under the guidance of their teachers, to work collaboratively towards the accomplishment of assigned tasks. As a lecturer, I have often viewed and used collaborative learning as a palliative solution to the challenge of having to deal with massive classrooms. Whereas, as demonstrated in the present study, there is inherent value in allowing learners talk. For, it is in talking that they negotiate and position their voices in relation to specific tasks and learning outcomes. It is equally through taking that they construct understandings of knowledge that are consonant with learning outcomes and objectives. Analysis of group talk in this study has also shown that the dialogic orientation of small group talk can serve as basis for engaging learners into deeper learning and into other form of higher cognitive processes. This is consonant with other studies on higher education learning and teaching which affirm that the opportunity for learners to talk is strongly related to critical thinking, the central pedagogic goal of all forms of higher education (Gosling, 2006; Barnett, 2009).

Hence, a key implication of this study in classroom practice is related to the opportunity that classroom and extra-classroom talks offers learners to develop higher cognitive processes and more meaningful learning. Giving learners the opportunity to talk, the opportunity of blending their voices with what they identify and consider as valuable objective knowledge is of great value to their learning. For, it is through their voices that learners feel most empowered, that they take ownership of knowledge. Knowledge is knowledge of the learner only when the latter is capable of articulating knowledge received in his or her own voice. So, there is need to create opportunities that will allow each individual learner the opportunity to ‘ventriloquise,’ to construction their individual understanding of established knowledge. From a dialogic point of view talking to a listening peer might be as valuable as talking with teacher. What really matters is the opportunity to take ownership of knowledge through talk.

Given that learners in group talk, through their voices, tend to role-play different voices and characters of the academic community to which they belong, if formal classroom practices, activities and learners-teachers’ interactions could exemplify higher learning processes, it is most likely that learners themselves within their informal groups will develop better ‘talking habits’ capable of achieving better learning outcomes. In order words, classroom talk in the hands of a skillful lecturer who understand the inherent value of having learners talk amongst themselves, can become ‘models’ of effective peer learning. Talk between teachers and students, and among learners themselves can become a defining trait of teaching and learning, from preparation to assessment.

In terms of lesson preparation, pockets of dialogue can be inserted into lesson plans with specific learning outcomes or taxonomy in view. A lesson examining a phenomenon from its root causes and manifestation, for example, can equally make provisions for classroom dialogue on its implications. Such dialogue might occur between the teacher and a few students, but the teacher must become mindful of the stimulating effect that the layout of the dialogue has on other learners’ ability to engage in similar dialogue outside the controlled setting of the classroom. Research on assessment for learning highlights the value of formative assessment procedures within the classroom which is based on the opportunity that the classroom offers for live interaction between teachers and learners (Black & Wiliam, 1998). While classroom talk which favours divergent

interaction add value to the formative use of assessment within the classroom (Pryor & Crossouard, 2010), the actual process involved in such interactions and types of prompting questions used in the process can become exemplifications of meaningful dialogue and meaningful learning to all present.

Also, in relation to summative assessment, the role of informal groups in helping learners better prepare for individual assessment, allows for the possibility of assigning specific open-ended tasks to learners under the assumption that they will eventually discuss the task in their already constituted learning groups. Everything being equal, the opportunity to talk does not always guarantee good quality learning. For, as the present study has shown in the context of Cameroon, ‘low cognitive level’ of some group talk can be largely attributed to the kind of assessment task that students are required to fulfil. Hence, there is need for greater attention to be paid to assessment task design. Informal collaborative learning is most likely to lead to more expansive and richer peer dialogues if appropriate assessments are assigned, based on subject and content appropriate taxonomies, constructed around specific learning outcomes.

To further enrich informal peer dialogue, provision can be made for more divergent approaches to classroom assessment which allows students to report back on tasks with divergent perspectives, which give expression to personal claims or constructions of understanding of knowledge. Such creative approaches to teaching and learning, constructed around learners’ initiative, remain crucial, especially in Africa, where the massification of higher education seems to continually undermine classroom learning and teaching strategies. Providing learners with the opportunity to construct more divergent and personalised understanding of knowledge will eventually help them better develop critical learning skills, and prepare them to handle the challenges they are likely to face in their professional, personal and social interactions (Amua-Sekyi, 2011).

As a practitioner, this research disposes me more to aim within classroom practice empower learners’ voices through specific tasks that promote divergent views and stimulate learning interactions. I see in this the possibility of engaging university learners through spontaneous talks among themselves at different intervals of my teaching, without the need to direct, to frame and scaffold understandings. Learners themselves are capable of articulating understandings of knowledge in relations to perceived assessment demands.

Hence, informal collaborative learning, as opposed to teacher-assigned collaborative tasks in massive formal lecture halls, can better provide the opportunity for learners' individual, deliberative and critical voices to emerge as part of ongoing dialogue on the construction of understanding of disciplinary knowledge. As such, this present study contributes to the discourse on the relevance of higher-education pedagogies in African universities, as a voice in research seeking to challenge the dominant and single-sided narrative of African universities as 'dysfunctional' and overcrowded institutions, which produce 'academically inferior' graduates compared to peers in other parts of the world (Altbach *et al.*, 2009; 2016).

7.4.2 On Curriculum Development, Assessment and Education Planning

The findings of this research reveal the centrality of learners' voices in education, particularly their ineluctability with regards to the meaning and relevance of knowledge in each context. Given that learners' voices embody the 'immanence' of learners involved, that is, the 'power within themselves,' (Brathewaite, 1998: p.272), they cannot be totally submerged by any other authoritative voices without prejudice to learning itself. On the contrary, under the right circumstances, voices re-emerge with added value and relevance to knowledge as perceived within contexts.

Consequently, education planning and curriculum development in Cameroon universities and in similar contexts marked by massification of classroom learning must make provision for 'pedagogic spaces', where learners will be able to creatively explore different meanings, understandings and express themselves beyond the boundaries of institutional restrictions.

In other words, there is need to align subsequent university planning, infrastructure and logistics management, reforms and innovations with principles and ethos that allow for, value and promote transformative learning experiences through the voices of learners. All three universities included in this research seemed to be aware of the need to support learners in their 'after-school programmes'. Some universities provided extra-security, energy and limited maintenance services around buildings and lecture hall which served learners at night-time as space for small group talks. One of the participating institutions invested in open spaces, which during the day, served as recreational spaces, and during

after school hours, served as space for informal collaborative learning meeting (Photo#15 # and #16).

Photo #15: (left): showing recreational space during the day.

Tchoumbou-Ngantchop © (2015)



There is a need for institutions to make learning spaces even more accessible, appealing and safe for learners, outside of standard university business hours.

Similarly, curricula design and assessment procedures ought to draw as much as possible from dialogic approaches and processes to learning and teaching, which favor learner-centred pedagogies associated with a collaborative understanding of learners' agency (Fernandez *et al.*, 2001; Hardman, 2016). In recent times, government reforms in higher education in Cameroon have opted for the 'radical transformation' of the higher education sector, and for the economic, social and cultural development of the country (MINE-SUP, 2012). As an outcome of this policy, competence and capacity building seem to be the leitmotiv of all structural and pedagogic reforms in Cameroon higher education as imagined by educational planners.



Photo # 16: The same recreational space transformed into informal learning space in the early hours of the evening.

Tchoumbou-Ngantchop © (2015)

But then, unless structural reforms are coordinated with appropriate curricula that guarantee creativity and context-relevant knowledge (attributes of the dialogic space), the Cameroonian dream of radically transforming her higher education to meet the demands of economic development would hardly materialize. This present study illustrates the extent to which learners' voices, taken seriously in context, can position learners in the academic discourses responsible for their social and cultural transformation. Alongside the transmission of functional disciplinary knowledge, there is need for democratic models of higher education in Cameroon today, which accommodates learners' voices in their most creative expression. For voices represents learners' 'immanence,' that is 'the power within themselves' (Braitewaite, 1993: p.273) - because these voices hold together the complexities of living in heterogeneous and hybrid spaces, where identities are constantly being negotiated and positioned in discourse. The voices of Cameroonian learners are shaped by experiences of shared local, social and economic spaces, including exposure to more than 240 ethnic languages and cultural complexities that are unique to Cameroon. These voices are also influenced by endless networks of human relationships, camaraderie, shared interests and a connectedness with the globalized world which, engaged properly, that is beyond the authoritative discourse of the classroom can further enrich university learning experiences.

Furthermore, even as education is valued for its potential to enhance competence, skills and the building of human capacities, its intrinsic non-functional value, which comes from the natural quest for meaning, expressed in culture, cannot be overlooked (Alain

de Botton, 2012). Education is also meant for guidance; it helps people ‘live lives’ and make choices, it helps them find meaning and consolation and provides ethical structure. The dialogic detour in group talk is ontological, as much as it is epistemological and hermeneutical, in terms of the meanings and relevance that it brings to learning. Education planners and curriculum developers should provide learners with the opportunity to explore their identities in the socioeconomic and cultural world in which they live. Culture and affective experiences of knowing should not be presented as subjects of learning only. They should be integrated into learning environments as spaces for dialogue which allows learners to talk and construct their understanding of the meaning and relevance of education, culture, and philosophical debates on what makes life worthwhile for learners. Voices, in other words, can be a way of humanizing learning experiences today. Alongside standard disciplinary knowledge transmitted to students, school curricula ought to provide other non-formal classroom spaces and activities, which allow the expression of voices and creativity through the humanities.

7.4.3 Social Spaces and Learning

More extensive social and cultural implications can be derived from the close link that the findings established between learning and spatiality. A key finding is that informal spaces cannot be taken for granted. They are dialogic spaces in which the meanings and relevance of knowledge are constituted and taken on by learners. At a basic level, this thesis brings to light the value of ordinary social interactions, which are commonplace among learners or people with shared learning interests, irrespective of the social or cultural context in which they find themselves. As I complete the writing of this thesis, I poise to consider the contribution of informal spaces, conversations and ‘dialogic’ conversations that I have had with friends, colleagues and different learners on the topic of this study. In very unlikely spaces, times and circumstances, the opportunity to talk, to articulate and ventriloquise ideas from my academic communities have contributed in different ways in helping me construct what has become an argument of reason on collaborative learning. Particularly significant are brief instances of when I have had to verbalise summary of my findings not only to colleagues and to fellow researcher, but also parents, friends and relatives with little knowledge of educational theories. Far removed from supervision appointments and meetings, each of these situations have

revealed to me power of my researcher's voice to position and actualise itself within different constructions of understanding of my research.

Discourse on university learning in the twenty-first century seems to take for granted notions of inclusivity and openness because higher education today makes claims about learning that are global and international (Altbach *et al.*, 2010). The assumption today is that universities are open spaces for the exchange of knowledge. But the relationship between knowledge and spatiality, as established by the findings of this research, calls for a closer consideration of 'internationalising' experiences of higher education (Knight, 2006), which is a common practice in cross-border learning. For, *internationalisation* of higher education tends to undermine reciprocity of learning experiences. There is need to consider cross-border learning with a space not perceived to be physical-geographic areas of learning, but as a third spaces (Soja, 1996), a '*globalizing*' space in higher education, which Patel and Lynch (2013: p.223) describe as one which 'advocates a positive learning experience' and encourages the enhancement of learners' '*global* [emphasis in text] experience' through a critical academic and cultural exchange of global and local socio-economic and political issues. Instructional strategies supporting globalized learning curricula are recommended within these dialogic spaces of transformation.

Consequently, when two students meet in the smoking area of the library, spatiality contributes to knowledge when they interact with each other based on university guidelines on how knowledge is assessed and valued. But spatiality only begins to truly impact on knowledge and learning if, and when, the same informal spaces allow the possibility of a *dialogic detour* in which both students are drawn to discover each other's voice as a different expression of knowing, and in that encounter, enrich each other. Ideally, this should take place without the need to overcome their contradictions and differences based on any single, homogenously-constituted learning discourse. A reflection on my personal research itinerary throws more light on the subject.

7.5 Critical Reflection

My research, however, gives room to raise critical questions on how such a positioning and related perceptions impacts on my learning experiences within geographically different academic communities. As Ricoeur, suggest, only in the ‘test of the foreign’ do ‘we become sensitive to the strangeness of our own language (Ricoeur, 2006: p.29). So, while the construct of ‘international student’ might mirror a convenient narrative of me within my host community, it might also not accurately represent the complexities and diversities that my voice as a learner embodies within the same community. The concept of ‘international student’ is centered around negotiating learning spaces. In principle, the structure of the academic programme to which I am enrolled assumes that physical space and time have been negotiated to facilitate both on-campus interaction and distant-learning interactions with my host academic community. The assumption is that if I followed the linear progression of the programme, as laid out by my academic community, I would achieve the expected recognition and merit associated with intended learning outcome as constructed by the patronizing voices that positions me as an international student.

But my research itinerary has disposed me thus, to question every authoritative discourse or grand narrative on how my learning is expected to occurs. This is simply because the construction of understanding of knowledge is not obtained by attribution, but is negotiated by voices in dialogue; my voice, in this case, in dialogue with other voices. For, as also established in findings of this research, individual learners’ voices are essentially characterized by ‘addressivity’ (Bakhtin 1986: p.99), openness to ‘an-other.’ Yet, I can argue, based on the methodology applied in this research and based on its findings, that my experience of spatiality within my different academic communities mirrors forms of tension involved in cross-border learning and ‘cross-spatial’ interaction as experienced in the twenty-first century. These tensions are produced and sustained by the ‘single-side’ discourses of formal classroom learning, translated into institutionalized requirements of learning and enshrined in learner’s daily experiences.

My remotest interest in the relationship between context and learning in higher education stems from successes, challenges, frustrations, and even failures that I encountered when I left Cameroon for graduate studies in a foreign university. Coming from an African

university, I was initially positioned in ways that undermined my ability to fully undertake the same level of studies as my peers, who, supposedly, had had previously learning experience in Western universities. Thus, I was not allowed to take more than a few courses in my first semester, though I felt capable of taking a few more course. I was made to understand, that students from Africa generally ‘needed time to get used to the western ways’ of learning which, unlike in Africa, involves critical thinking and other related skills that many ‘international student’ did not adequately exhibit.

Though I quickly overcame these perceptions, I never ceased trying to understand them in relation to myself, my experiences of other African students in foreign universities, and in relation to students that I teach in Cameroon, vis-à-vis their own learning experiences in the sociocultural context of Cameroon. It has been my hunch that understanding the competencies, expectations and academic skills that were either expected or lacking in me, observing how they are constructed and challenged as grounds for assumptions that were made about me or about other international students, could help me better understand my students’ learning expectations. Reflecting on these experience, I am aware today that in seeking to quickly overcome perceptions and assumptions about me and about other international learners at the time, I was already positioning myself in ways that submerged and sacrificed my own voice to better conform to discourses about learning that I perceived at the time as synonymous with the voice of truth.

As I undertook this research observing learners involved in group talk, outside of formal learning spaces, I have gradually come to realize the power of the voice in constructing understanding of knowledge as relevant within contexts. I have come to learn that learning is always about negotiating access into different academic communities through one’s voice, and that some institutions or communities are more accommodating to emerging voices than others.

As an African student in a Western university today, both the official institutional objectives of my learning and engaging the informal dialogic spaces around me orientate how I discern and position my voice in the social, political and cultural life of my host community. My constructed identities also influence the way I construct my understanding of relevant knowledge both as a student and a professional. I am therefore constantly

challenged to re-negotiate access and to position myself in my respective learning community/setting on which the relevance of my emerging knowledge depends. Consequently, pursuing learning in Cameroon, at a geographical distance from my host country, but being ‘international Student’ enrolled and supervised by abroad, strips discipline knowledge of its original frame of reference. At the same time, learning at Sussex during the summer, away from Cameroon, questions fundamental claims that can be made of knowledge and of its relevance to the Cameroon context. So, greater part of my learning over the years has involved negotiating learning spaces. The more I navigate learning spaces, the more I also understand the ‘limited-ness’ of knowing, and ironically, the more I discover the power that lies within me, within my voice to negotiate the spaces from which my knowing draws relevance.

There is a strong relationship between knowledge produced and its impact on the researcher’s understanding and praxis (Dunne *et al.*, 2005; Usher, 1996). My reflexive positionality as both a learner and a teacher in cross-cultural higher education provides the unique opportunity in this research of exploring important learning practices among learners in Cameroon universities and in similar contexts. Having lived and studied outside of Cameroon for more than a decade, interacting with peers in graduate schools in a few continents, I have become more sensitive to sweeping and generalizing assumptions about learning, a practice which unfortunately, continues to fuel discourses about the lack of leverage between African universities and universities in other parts of the world. As a researcher, I am drawn to students’ perspectives on university practices as a way of helping them make the best of their university learning community. As such, exploring informal collaborative learning has been essentially a reflexive process; one that has called me to the task of challenging my own basic assumptions on how students engage with their unique contexts of learning. To arrive at this reflexive point there could not have been a better way than to begin by examining basic learning initiatives, like small group talk, which appear ordinary at first sight, but reveals, at a closer glance, important insights about how students engage in learning to enable their distinctive voices to emerge.

As a lecturer in a Cameroonian university, the more I teach students, the more I realize that learning for them is not a passive experience. My students are constantly in the

process of negotiating and re-negotiating their learning space, positioning themselves for or against the learning situations in which their voices are drowned by factors like massification of university classrooms, overriding assessment motives, and the under-estimation of their identities as critical learners. At such moments, they draw from the power within themselves, that is, their voices to construct their understanding of meaning as relevant to their institutional contexts of learning and to them as Cameroonians and Africans opened to the limitless possibility of their ‘becoming’ in the world around them.

7.6 Further Research

Informal collaborative learning does not occur in a social vacuum. As findings of this present study suggests, group talks come into existence as a backlash of teaching-learning practices in institutions. Conversely, there is need for further research on the relationship between informal collaborative learning occurring outside of the classroom and learning occurring with the formal classroom. There is a tension between the dialogic space and the institutionalised learning space, and how both spaces interact and insect with each other. This difficulty can be traced in the work of Bakhtin (1986), who abstained from resolving the tension between the authoritative-discourse and the internally persuasive discourse, even as some Bakhtinians, such as Matusov (2007), claim that both are interconnected: one cannot exist without the other. There is a need for empirical research on how institutional discourses relate to voices as they emerge because theoretically, learning interactions are necessarily teaching-learning interactions, and as well as structure-agency interactions (Ashwin, 2008: p.152; Apple, 1979). So, while informal collaborative learning as presented in this research gives voice to learners’ agency, there is a need to carry out further research on how learners’ voices enriched by group talk, recursively impact on subsequent interactions within the formal classroom. Conversely, there is also an avenue to investigate institutional responses to learners’ dialogic voices as they seek to incorporate the wider academic, social and cultural communities. Only then would the cycle of learning be complete. The key question is whether the informal space can openly engage with the institutionalised discourses, without sacrificing some of its unique traits.

In addition, an important part of this present thesis has been the exploration of the sociocultural features of informal collaborative learning. As they emerge together with learners' voices, elements of power, as related to knowledge of gender and of professional status and the social and spiritual sense of self(ves) (as embodied by learners' voices), lend themselves to further theorization on the processes involved in framing learners' identities in Cameroon universities.

Furthermore, there is also need to empirically research the implications of collaborative learning on university planning and development. More research needs to explore further the ideal curriculum, organizational and architectural configuration of a university environment that favours learners' dialogic engagement with their learning. In other words, how can institutions encourage informal dialogic spaces without 'formalising' them or without the latter losing what is its most desirable feature: freedom, expressed in its 'addressivity' (Bakhtin, 1981), that is, its endless openness to the other?

7.7 Conclusion

At some point at the start of their career, every graduate must deal with the question of soft skills, competences and of capabilities, which, though not related to their area of study, adds to its relevance. This often refers to the distinctive traits that prospective professionals bring to their new work environment; for example, their ability to negotiate power relations with colleagues and clients of different temperaments and cultural backgrounds; their ability to work collaboratively towards expected outcomes; and their willingness to creatively and constructively integrate past experiences into current professional expectations. These, obviously, are not skills and competences that automatically emerge from learners' previous engagement with formal learning at the university. It appears to be a different form of learning that ought to have evolved alongside the learners' advancement in the acquisition of discipline knowledge. This research, through the exploration of learners' voices within informal spaces of learning, opens a new vista of understanding on how these competences, skills and capabilities are constituted during learners' university experiences.

The pigmy tribe, which partly resides in the equatorial rainforest in Cameroon, has a proverb which can be translated literally as follows: *'the age of a tree is not measured*

by its height but by the nature of its stump.’ In other words, a tree is valued by the size of its stump, which obviously takes many years to mature, to harden, and to spread out. It is the stump that which determines the resistance of the tree in the face of tropical winds. Education is like a tree and academic achievement constitutes its height. Nevertheless, how far one has come academically, does not guarantee the true value of education. What matters is the tree’s stump, the part of the tree buried deep underneath the ground; representing the silent voices, which though submerged underground, gives the tree its *colour in context, imperceptibly...[turning] the waste to shade and fiber, milk and memory... Or else: all is translation* (see. James Merrill, 1926-1995)

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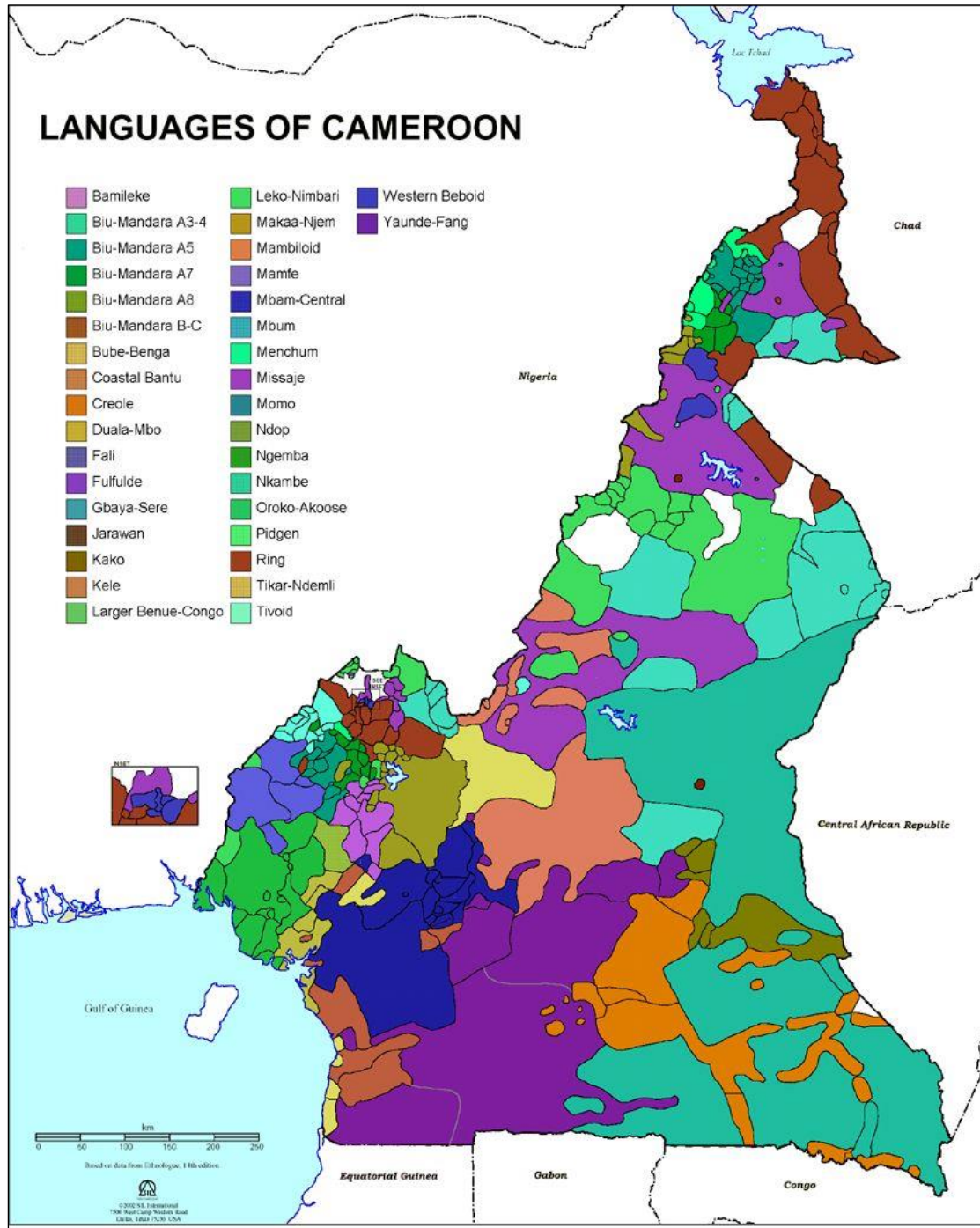
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APPENDICES

Appendix 2.1: Linguistic-Ethnographic Map of Cameroon



Appendix: Cameroon Map 1

Source: [http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-jP2K8cVD8PI/U8K5I-](http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-jP2K8cVD8PI/U8K5I-oFiwI/AAAAAAAAAIY/sMMMR5G3avQ/s1600/languages%2Bof%2Bcam.png)

[oFiwI/AAAAAAAAAIY/sMMMR5G3avQ/s1600/languages%2Bof%2Bcam.png](http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-jP2K8cVD8PI/U8K5I-oFiwI/AAAAAAAAAIY/sMMMR5G3avQ/s1600/languages%2Bof%2Bcam.png) [accessed 30/09/2016]

Appendix 2.2: The Impact of International Agendas on Education in Cameroon

International agenda governing national practices.	Major directives and guidelines in education practice in Cameroon (1995-2008)
1990 – Jomtien Conference on Education for All	<p><u>Period of slow compliance (1990 – XXXX)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1995 National Education Forum - 1998 Law No. 98/004 regulating Nursery, Primary and Secondary Education. Part I, section 5 “<i>Primary Education shall be compulsory</i>” (Tambo 2003: 122)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2000 Dakar Forum - 2000 Millennium Development Goals (International Aid – HIPC - and education agenda) - Preliminary document of HIPC issues several articles of Compliance to Cameroon calling for reform in many areas including education (World Bank, 2000): - Improved and equitable access to education: about 2500 classrooms to be built - Improvement of efficiency and quality of education: revision of curriculum to include instruction on HIV/AIDS - Better management and governance of school system: the creation of school councils - 2002 Launching of the Fast Track Initiative - 2005 extensive and enhanced Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI) 	<p><u>Period of accelerated compliance (2000-2003):</u></p> <p><i>based on the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) 1998 and 2003, in line with the MDGs as conditionality for HIPC:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2000 Decree No. 2000/359 of 5 Dec. creating special status for teachers in public sector - 2001 Law No. 005 of 16 April regulating management of higher education institutions - Free primary education policy adopted - 2001 Government Order No. 01/0096/MINE-SUP privatizing higher education - 2002 Decree No. 2002/216 of 24 August creating Ministry of Technical and Vocational Education - 2003 Decree of 8 December accelerating decentralization by: stamping out the Ministry of Technical Education and creating three separate ministries in charge of education. - 2005 Failure to qualify for HIPC funding is followed by further acceleration of a Poverty Reduction Strategy for the “<i>Fast Track Initiative</i>” - Qualification for HIPC funding after the following results in Education, among others: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Completed construction of 3,768 new classrooms by ministry of Basic Education Decentralized teacher management and adoption of new teacher statutes.

Appendix 4.1: Certificate of Approval for Research



Social Sciences & Arts Cross-School Research Ethics Committee CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL	
Reference Number:	1112/08/07
School:	ESW
Title of Project	INFORMAL PEER LEARNING IN CAMEROON HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY
Principal Investigator: (Supervisor)	Michel Auguste TCHOUMBOU NGANTCHOP (Westbrook)
Expected Start Date:*	15/10/2013
<p>*NB. If the <u>actual</u> project start date is delayed beyond 12 months of the <u>expected</u> start date, this Certificate of Approval will lapse and the project will need to be reviewed again to take account of changed circumstances such as legislation, sponsor requirements and University procedures</p>	
<p>This project has been given ethical approval by the Social Sciences/Arts Research Ethics Committee (C-REC). Please note the following requirements for approved submissions:</p> <p>Amendments to research proposal - Any changes or amendments to the approved proposal, which have ethical implications, must be submitted to the committee for authorisation prior to implementation.</p> <p>Feedback regarding any adverse and unexpected events - Any adverse (undesirable and unintended) and unexpected events that occur during the implementation of the project must be reported to the Chair of the Social Sciences C-REC. In the event of a serious adverse event, research must be stopped immediately and the Chair alerted within 24 hours of the occurrence.</p>	
Authorised Signature	
Name of Authorised Signatory (C-REC Chair or nominated deputy)	Professor Stephen Shute 22/07/2013

APPENDIX 4.2: Group Observation Portfolio

(Used to record observations at every session attended...)

University or Campus:

	Group Profile	Subject in Discussion	Remarks
<i>Date:</i> <i>Time:</i> <i>Location:</i> <i>Visit No.</i>	<i>Gender: __Boys/ _ Girls</i> <i>Language code:</i> <i>Ages of participants:</i>	<i>Subject Code and Level:</i> <i>Chapter:</i> <i>Topic:</i> <i>Non-academic topic:</i>	<i>Is session audio recorded:</i> <i>Y/N</i> <i>Digital file code:</i>
ISSUES OBSERVED			<i>Suggested concepts, theories, possible links and remarks</i>
<i>Description:</i>	<i>Striking features and issues to be investigated further in focus group interviews and in interviews with individual participants</i>		

APPENDIX 4.3: Focus Group Interviews Protocol

(All individual interviews will be audio recorded)

FOCUS GROUP SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

(Related to Sub Research Questions I)

“Why do students in Cameroon universities engage in informal collaborative learning?”

- a) Questions related to personal profile of participants:
 - i) Where do you come from and where did you do your primary and secondary education?
 - ii) Would you consider yourself English-Speaking or a French-speaking Cameroonian, and why?
- b) Question related to personal history of learning
 - i) Describe how you studied at secondary school
 - ii) Did also get together to study with friends both individually but especially collectively?
 - iii) How different are your study experiences at college (Secondary school) from common practices of learning that you find around here (referring to the university where the candidate is registered and take courses)?
- c) Related to their participation in the particular group to which they belong
 - i) How did you find out about this study group?
 - ii) How long have you been a member of this study group?
 - iii) Do you belong to other study groups on campus?
 - iv) Which is your most regular group? How long have you known its members?
 - v) Did you also find out about others?
 - vi) What were some of the criteria that you often use to look for a study group?
 - vii) Why did you choose to belong to this particular group?
 - viii) What in particular would you say you like about this group?
 - ix) What are your apprehensions about the group?
- d) Related to participation in the group's activities
 - i) To what extent do you think that your success depends on this group?
 - ii) How do you prepare for the different sessions?
 - iii) Do you often feel discouraged or bored during working sessions?
 - iv) What do you think about other group members' participation?
 - v) Who do you think invests the most in the group?

- vi) What do you think he/she gets out of it?
 - vii) Apart from course work, what other topics do you like discussing with your group members?
- e) Related to benefits of belong to a work group
- i) Do you often depend on a group to study? If yes, why? If no, why?
 - ii) What are some of your most memorable experience with the group? Describe a particular session that had a positive impact on you.
 - iii) To what extent does the group help you prepare for examinations?
 - iv) What extra help do you seek, apart from the group, in preparing for examinations?
 - v) What are the benefits and inconveniences of belonging to your group?
 - vi) Do you meet your other group members outside of the group's learning activities? What do you do if and when you come together outside of campus?
 - vii) Have you made friends from previous learning groups to which you belong? Do you keep contact?
 - viii) Can you recommend this group to another learner or friend? If yes, why? If no, why?

SUBSEQUENT FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS BASED ON OBSERVED STUDY SESSIONS

	Session	Expansion/further expansion
1.	Pre-session	<p>This section of the interview examines learners' motivations, preparation and expectations of group learning sessions. It explores questions like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. <i>Why do you think you need to work with members of your group on the particular topic discussed during the session?</i> ii. <i>How did you prepare for the session?</i> iii. <i>What were you expecting as the session drew near?</i> iv. <i>What were your apprehensions about the group on this particular task (if there were any?)</i>
2.	During Session <i>Specific Questions in line with research questions?</i>	<p>This section of the individual interview focuses on particular learner's dispositions, attitudes and contributions to the discussions, and on his/her perception of other participants during the group exercise.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. <i>Why did you say what you said...?</i> ii. <i>You seemed disinterested at a particular instance when xxx was being discussed. Why?</i> iii. <i>You reached the following conclusion on this topic How did this particular conclusion help you to better understand the topic?</i> iv. <i>You used the xxx examples during your intervention. Why?</i>
3.	Post-Session <i>(unstructured opened ended questions based on learner's experience)</i>	<p>This section of the interview will explore individual learner's assessment of informal collaborative activity. It looks at how learners perceive specific group activities and how they hope to benefit from these immediately as students, and in a long run as professionals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. <i>Apart from academic achievements, what else would you say are the benefit of belonging to such a group?</i> ii. <i>What are some of the non-academic benefits of this session?</i> iii. <i>What are the inconveniences to you, as participant, in spending this much time with the group rather than working individually?</i> iv. <i>Do you get along well with all the members of the group? If not, why?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. <i>Describe a time when you felt like ending your relationship with the group. Why did you feel like quitting?</i> vi. <i>Did you meet with any of your group members during the week and outside of school? What did you do together?</i>

		vii. <i>Imagine yourself as a professional working with a company. Would you like to have your group members working in the same company with you? Why or why not?</i>
4.	Other issues arising from interview	

APPENDIX 4.4: Observation Notes on Group Interaction

GROUP OBSERVATION PORTFOLIO (To be used to record observations at every session attended...)			
University or Campus: ...G.H.B... Campus... (School of Business)			
Group Profile Date: 16/03/2011 Time: 7.30 pm Location: Eco Village Visit: 1 2 3 4 5 6	Gender: 2 Boys 3 Girls Language code used: French Ages of participants:	Subject in Discussion Subject Code and Level: Research Methods Chapter: Topic: Non academic topic:	Other remarks Is session audio recorded: Y/N Digital file Code on Computer: Your phone:
SUBSTANTIAL ISSUES OBSERVED:			Hand out as basis for study.
Description: Large group seated under light speaking French as they discuss research methods.		Striking features and issues to be investigated further in focus group interviews and in interviews with individual participants	Suggested Concepts, Theories, Possible links and remarks
→ leading speaker as other students take notes. → They come to a difficult concept and there is silence as everyone reads from note to understand. The first to grasp explains to the others. → Prob of non understanding - "non-probability sample": Attempt to give up by leading student. mention that it is not part of her speculation. - 1 boy + 1 girl add on sit on chairs they brought and join in conversation. → Gets noisy: one student tries to centralise focus by reading out loud. → One student reads meaning of research designs. Another student explains understanding. Others are more interested in craning. = Attention is drawn to applicability of definition but students are more interested in particular definition. - leading student reads from her summary, others expect that she reads directly from notes. - Three students seen to be studying the		Some students are more receptive as they take down notes. "Dengue Effect": ca va venir, ca ne va pas venir. Concern is what will come at exams. French is used but key words are said in English. 1. read a way of highlighting key words.	→ value of vocabulary and comprehension "Hidden curriculum" Based on possibility of ex

Appendix: Research Tool 1

APPENDIX 5.1: Extended Data Analysis

The left hand side of the table shows the different textual contexts in which Delphine' voices is actualised in discussions. The bracketed letters correspond to the number lines of the transcribed dialogue.

'Fixed Context' identifier	Discourse
<p><i>[1-2] Context of Tasks based on institutional practice</i></p> <p><i><u>deixis as tool</u></i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 'you' – as given 2. 'we' – as Perceived <p><i>[3-5a] Context of Authority of knowledge</i></p> <p><i>[5b-6] Context of Task</i></p> <p><i>[7-9] Response to Context of Authority of Knowledge</i></p> <p><i><u>'Fill in' (Gee, 2011) or ellipses</u></i></p> <p><i>[10-11] Context of Task</i></p> <p><i>[12] Context of Practice of Assessment as perceived by learners</i></p> <p><i>[13-15] Context of Evaluation and performance</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Evelyn: (reading) Why do <u>you</u> classify soils? <u>2 marks</u> 2. Delphine: <u>We</u> classify soil to know the method of formation of the soil (...) To know the observed properties such as... 3. Aury: [the soil tension, the soil=] Where did you take this answer Delphine? Where did you take this answer? 4. Delphine: In the <u>book</u>. Tello (the lecturer) gave it. 5. Aury: [Which Tello?] He has notes. <p>(reading) to recognise the diagnostic features, the horizon, the soil suitability for irrigation and for drainage= all those things</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Delphine: to know the soil profile of that particular area, to know the land capability or stability. 7. Aury: <u>Ee::h</u> 8. Delphine: (In French) <u>Tello gave it</u> 9. Aury : (In French): <u>I did not get it from Tello yesterday? I went looking for it so far away=</u> 10. Delphine: <u>So</u>, soil has been classified under the following : Method of formation of the soil, profile characteristic observed in the field; observed properties such as structure, column, land capacity and sustainability 11. Delphine + Aury: [For irrigation] 12. Aury: How many marks? 4 points nah? (.) I am saying it is the same thing I have here I did not take from the book. 13. Delphine: Clap for Delphine nah 14. Aury: Clap for m::e ((laughter)) 15 Delphine: clap for you that what? What have you done? Clap for y::ou

APPENDIX 5.2: Further Analysis on the Collective Use of Voice

A single speaker can some time vocalise a compilation of several other voices equally present in the discussion. For example, in the transcript below, I have illustrated the compilation of different voices imbedded in the speaker's utterances by adding italicised notes:

5 **Ayi:** [You state the four steps] and say that *pre-treatment* is this...

If you state that:

Hypothetically voicing Delphine primary voice

pre-treatment is this...

Hypothetically voicing Delphine's secondary voice

the teacher will be expecting you to stay that...

Hypothetically voicing teacher's proleptic expectation of Delphine

'saccharification' is this and then '*fermentation*' is this and then '*distillation*' is this...

Hypothetically ventriloquating teacher's voice which is proleptic to Delphines's voice

Hypothetical construction is the device used by **Ayi**. '[If you say,' 'the teacher will say/be expecting...' show the extent of voicing and ventriloquation. Ayi's voice epitomises the collective capacity of learners' voices to stretch out meanings and understanding, by employing strategies that allow them to perform others' voices without possessing them, or without being possessed by them. The creation of meaning depends on this process as it occurs continuous throughout discussion.

APPENDIX 5.3 : Full Transcript On The Formative Expansion Knowledge

The left column shows group talk as it unfolds. The right column highlights the expansion

Interactive Dialogue: UB3 (Level 400 Sociology and Anthropology student) 16 th March 2015	Implied Formative Expansion of Dialogue
<p><i>Agbor:</i> Please talk nah! (2) We know that the conflict theories are trying to explain change as a result of conflict. The evolutionary theories are trying to explain change as a result of the origin and progress of the society and they believe that progress is uni-directional (3).</p>	<p>Expansion of task (based of substantives – main noun – ‘Conflict/Evolutionary theories’):</p> <p><i>Begins with a provocative exclamation. Followed by explanation; defining obvious concepts prefixed by ‘we know that,’ to establish convergence.</i></p>
<p><i>Estel:</i> Conflict theory and Evolutionary theory. They actually complement? When you analyse nah, you just talk about the two theories and say they actually lead to change...</p>	<p>Further Expansion – (based on verbs):</p> <p><i>Focuses on Procedural knowledge. Questions the key concept to the tasks – ‘They actually complement?’; by so doing she freely explores other possible solutions ‘When you analyse nah, you just talk about the two theories and say they actually lead to change...’</i></p>
<p><i>Agbor:</i> [do you know the meaning of complement?] They complement, why? This is how I understand the question...</p>	<p>Addition Expansion through definition of main verb – ‘complement’ with emphatic open-ended question – why, followed by a long pause</p> <p><i>Agbor:</i> refocuses the task on its key term, ‘complement’ (convergence); this time with an open ended question, ‘why?’ making further exploration possible</p>

In order to meet learning expectations, Agbor and Estel seek to engage the task beyond the obvious as they construct their understanding of meaning. Through thought-provoking interventions, both learners seek to develop a better understanding of the task at hand. In Agbor’s understanding, for example, knowing the precise or agreed meaning of each concept is important. However, this is not as important as exploring each other’s understanding of how the task at hand specifically relates these concepts to each other.

APPENDIX 5.4: Full Transcription of Illustrative Texts on Metacognition

1. **Jasmine:** What is Radiation? (*long silence*)
2. **Jasmine:** Radiation
3. **Lauriette:** [Radiation is] just like = a form of = that is – let me say, how the sun reflects the sunrays back to nah
4. **Jasmine:** Yes [in the atmosphere]
5. **Ulrich:** it's one of the ways. There is radiation. There is conduction
6. **Lauriette:** Convection?
7. **Jasmine:** Conduction and Convection
8. **Lauriette:** But conduction and convection [...]
9. **Jamine:** That one is the transportation of energy, this one is the emission
10. **Ulrich:** So we can just talk of radiation here?
11. **Lauriette:** Where is the question he gave? You will see it (meaning the question)
12. **Jasmine:** In the Book. Where is my book? (..) I don't even know my book.
13. **Ulrich:** They say which differences [...] influences the global distribution of temperature? Now we need to know how temperature is distributed on the earth