Communication and Social Interaction across Cultures: The Case of a German and Ghanaian Educational Exchange Program

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Abstract: Using a constructivist epistemology, this paper explores the cross-cultural learning experiences of exchange students from *Hochschule* Düsseldorf University of Applied Sciences in Germany and the University for Development Studies in Ghana. The findings reveal differences in the students' commitment to agreements, tasks and time; while the German students have a high commitment to time awareness -- reporting to lectures and other meetings on time -- their Ghanaian counterparts do not. We suggest that universities preparing students for educational exchange programs should actively embark on cross-cultural education and training, providing adequate information on the context and culture of the host country, targeting all stakeholders before, during and after the exchange program. This will enhance effective intercultural relations and social interaction, and minimize culture shock.

<u>Keywords</u>: intercultural communication, international education, social interaction, multicultural education.

1. Introduction

The consequences of globalization have not left out their firm grip on education. Education is one of the reasons for the growing trend of multiculturalism, contributing significantly to the changing context of international settings the world over. Conspicuous of the trend has been the exodus of people from the developing countries to the developed world in search of better and different perspectives on education. Recently, an obvious trend is educational exchange programs, which permit students from the developed world to travel to the developing world and vice versa for education. The result of this trend is to help students develop an understanding of the interdependences among the nations of the world, involving cultural, national, and global identifications (Banks 2007); intercultural environments increasingly characterize the teaching and learning sessions in universities. The business of teaching, as Banks (2007: 101) contends, is a "multicultural encounter" where teachers and students belong to diverse groups characterized by age, gender, religion, culture, social class, race and ethnicity.

For Miksch (2002), enrolling students from different cultural backgrounds is critical to accomplishing the mission of higher education. Various researchers (e.g., Banks & Banks 1995, Tetreault 2010, Banks 2007, Astin 1993, Chang 1999, Gurin et al. 2002) report that the quality of teaching and level of students' achievements improve in classrooms where students are from culturally diverse backgrounds. Teachers who are competent in equity pedagogy are able to profit from diversity to enrich instruction and bring meaning to their classrooms and wider communities "instead of fearing or ignoring it" (Banks 2007:101). The long-term benefits of multicultural education include improved productivity, problem-solving skills, and

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relationships, with a corresponding reduction in prejudice and stereotyping. Multicultural education reinvigorates society, culminating in what Ameny-Dixon (2005: 1) describes as "a broader and more sophisticated view of the world". Conversely, multicultural education is often detrimentally characterized by anxiety and disquieting experiences born out of ill-preparation, lack of information and consequent culture shock, on the part of educators, administrators and students alike (Blair 2003, Ameny-Dixon 2005).

According to Shulman and Mesa-Bains (1993), comprehensive understanding of the different cultural elements and extent of differences involving diverse cultures is a sure way of creating positive relations among cultures and inclusive programs that cater to the needs of all concerned. Unfortunately, diversity in universities and higher institutions of learning often brings about miscommunication and incoherence, heightening levels of anxiety and discomfort (Ozturgut 2011, Abdulai 2018). For this and other reasons, this study uses an exchange program between the University for Development Studies (UDS) in Ghana and *Hochschule* Dusseldorf University of Applied Sciences (HSD) in Germany to investigate students' experiences of and opinions concerning communication, relationships and commitments. The findings of the study should contribute to enriching global knowledge concerning international education, intercultural relations, and understanding of commitments in the midst of diverse cultures, with African insight and perspective. On the managerial level, it should guide and assist management of universities and other institutions of higher learning that are delving into, or are already into the provision of, global education in creating structures and conditions necessary to engender useful international education.

The paper is structured as follows: after the introduction, we review the relevant theoretical literature and illuminate the role of culture in teaching and learning in a multicultural setting. This is followed by research design, semi-structured interviews, comparison analysis and interpretation. Finally, we discuss the research findings, conclusions, limitations and directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Communicating across cultures in teaching and learning atmosphere

How do people communicate across cultures? Ting-Toomey (1999) writes that one way a person becomes a global citizen is by developing the knowledge and skills of conscious intercultural communication; such knowledge and skills are crucial since direct contact with people from different cultures has become the norm rather than the exception. To acquire such competencies, in Martin's (1994) view, people need to be aware of their own assumptions, prejudices and stereotypes, as this forms the foundation for good interaction and effective learning. It is particularly important for teachers and learners in higher institutions of learning where, increasingly, it is becoming mandatory for universities in parts of the world to recruit staff and students from diverse cultures (Ameny-Dixon 2005). Universities need to determine appropriate responses to diverse and often conflicting behaviors, beliefs (including religious beliefs), value systems, and other ways of identifying oneself that students and staff bring along to the institutions (Banks 2007). Supporting heterogeneous teaching and learning environments helps students and staff alike to develop cross-cultural knowledge, skills and competencies.

Higher learning institutions are forums for building multicultural competencies. Hurtado (2005) postulates that people from diverse cultural backgrounds, in work-related settings (for example), appear to be more productive, creative and innovative compared to homogenous groups. Yet people experience setbacks from miscommunication. These cultural encounters would not be called to question if whatever one communicates in the midst of other cultures were well understood in a way he or she anticipates (Abdulai et al. 2017) without any culturally bound interpretations. In fact, communication is so embedded and omnipresent to

the extent that every exhibited behavior, including silence in the presence of another, is a form of communication (Abdulai et al. 2017). A person's culture of orientation becomes a filter through which verbal and non-verbal messages are encoded and decoded (Abdulai et al. 2019, Alhassan 2011, Gudykunst 1998, Neuliep et al. 2001). Students and staff of higher-education institutions need to develop what Banks (2007: 122) terms "a sophisticated understanding of the diverse groups" because every intercultural exchange, to lesser or greater extent, is replete with some level of ethnocentrism (Neuliep & McCrosky 1997). According to Johnson (1995: 59), those who impart knowledge in multicultural settings must themselves be intercultural communicators, conscious of their own culturally oriented experiences, ever ready to learn from other cultures and showcase commitment in teaching others the art of communicating across cultures; they must be empathic toward other cultures and behaviors and acquire awareness of themselves as cultural beings.

It is worth noting that effective communication is often reliant and predicated on context, and intrinsically culture is part and parcel of context, which suggests therefore that communication is mostly inseparable from culture (Pricope 2013). Pricope's belief is that the acquisition of intercultural competence by foreign students enhances effective communication with teachers and other intercultural groups, improves the communication capacity of students and minimizes situations of culture shock. It also eliminates ethnocentrism, which in turn prevents what Guan (1995) refers to as "self-centered dialogue", a situation where interactants communicate with people while employing their own culture as the standard of measurement (Neuliep et al. 2001).

2.2 Relations in global multicultural educational settings

Until now, the predominating understanding of multicultural education, especially in the United States, has been the assimilation or "melting-pot" perspective, which suppresses micro-cultures into the macro-culture. The assimilation or "melting-pot" perspective relaxes the cultural identities of the micro-cultures of migrants to enable them to assume the identity of the macro-culture so as to blend or absorb the micro-cultures into the mainstream society (Ameny-Dixon 2005). Multicultural education is an idea, an educational movement, a process; its goal is to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to learn regardless of race, culture, gender, social class or ethnicity – even as some students are denied those equal opportunities because of their backgrounds (Banks 2007). Banks writes (2007: 82) that multicultural education is "an educational reform movement that tries to reform schools in ways that will give all students an equal opportunity to learn" through teaching strategies that empower students and give them voice. It aims to instill democratic ideals such as justice, equality and freedom, in schools and in society.

Today, the question of multicultural education is at the heart of discussions worldwide on educational reform. The ever-increasing forces of globalization have given exposure and, indeed, prominence to differences in cultures: values, social practices and individual attitudes (Nteliou & Kehajia 2016).

Zhao (2007) holds that, when teachers and students from diverse cultures encounter each other in the classroom, different behaviors in the form of changed attitudes and feelings result. Such encounters are, we would add, not limited to those between teachers and students but also among students, teachers and administrators and throughout the communities where the learning institutions are located. It is imperative that differences in behavior be managed well via intercultural competencies: e.g., through Bank's (2007) dimensions of multicultural education (*content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction,* and *equity pedagogy*); as well as through the empowerment of school culture and social structure. Otherwise, if the different attitudes and feelings get to extreme ends, misunderstandings ensue (Zhao 2007).

Zhao notes that classrooms in China are hierarchically organized, with students showing profuse respect toward teachers. Teachers anticipate students being obedient, quiet and attentive to them as well as inclined to follow their instructions religiously. Teachers normally stand in front of the class with all students facing their direction as a sign of dignity and authority. Such societies are characterized by high power distance. Students listen to the teacher without interrupting his delivery with questions, until the end of the session when they can ask questions. Teachers are formally addressed by their full titles.

2.3 Conceptualizing culture and learning

This study is built on both the dynamic and essentialist frameworks of culture. To begin with, the theory of cultural dynamism posits that culture is dynamic, fluid, and contextual (Långstedt 2018, Adler & Aycan 2018).This implies that culture is not static but is subject to change over time. This model of culture is contrary to the essentialist view of culture, which assumes that culture is homogenous, deterministic and static (Hofstede 1997, Hall 1976, Gudykunst 1998). In addition, the cultural dynamic paradigm assumes that culture exists in the interaction between actors and not within actors (Långstedt 2018: 7). In this regard, the interaction between individual and groups could influence the creation and re-creation of cultures and the attribution of meanings to the cultures created.

Theories of culture and learning are inextricably related. Learning always takes place in a cultural setting and is "always dependent on the utilization of cultural resources" (Bruner 1996: 4). Jandt (2004) writes how culture is learned and shared. The learning and sharing of cultural values and norms are made possible through language and other forms of communication. Language and communication are tools to share or transfer cultural values and norms from one generation to another. Culture influences how we adapt to both old and new learning environments and how we acquire new values, assumptions and systems of thinking.

To highlight the relationship between culture and learning, Kolb (1984: 38) defines learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. If one considers knowledge – what is it? …where does it come from? …how does one come by it? – one realizes that the answers to these questions have deep cultural roots (Bruner 1996). Parsons and Shils (1951) assert that learning is the process by which new elements of action orientation are acquired by the actors' new cognitive orientation, new values, new objects and new expressive interests. Learning is not a product or a static concept but a holistic process. Hofstede (1997) observes that cultures cannot be acquired without learning, and learning cannot take place without sociocultural contexts. These concepts (culture and learning) will be applied to examine German and Ghanaian students' experiences of how culture influences learning in their host universities during the course of their international exchange program.

3. Research design and methods

The study implements an anti-positivist research paradigm, which holds that reality is constructed and deconstructed by the actors engaged in the construction of meaning (Bryman 2004, Kuada 2012). The "angle of vision" (Mannheim, 1949: 245) we adopt is that of students' experiences, perspectives and opinions on communication, relationships, and commitment to agreements. That angle of vision, together with the questions we posed, our assumptions, and our interpretation of the literature and our findings, is no doubt influenced by our culture and contexts. The results should be understood as a co-construction by all actors, using a case-study design. The case-study design is appropriate for describing or predicting processes associated with varieties of phenomena at the individual, group and organizational level (Yin 2003).

3.1 Access and interviews

To gain access to the study environment and subjects, a letter was written to the dean of faculty of education, University for Development studies, Ghana, requesting permission to carry out the study. Once approval was granted, participants were invited to take part through an introductory letter, which explained the rationale, ethical issues and duration of the study. Purposive sampling was used, meaning that the researcher selects the research participants based on his or her own judgment (Bryman 2004, Creswell 2009). The criteria for inclusion of both the German and Ghanaian study subjects were participation in the receiving university activities and effective interactions with domestic students and lecturers. Exclusion criteria were unwillingness to take part in the project and inadequate knowledge of the study context.

Individual semi-structured interviews were used. This type of interview encompasses a flexible set of questions where the study subjects are able to express their views about – in this case – their intercultural interactions and experiences in the receiving university and society (Bryman 2004). In order to gain insightful data, we designed an interview protocol, which comprised two main parts. The first part focused on participants' demographic data, while the second delved into the interview questions. Participants were asked to explain their everyday experience based on their interactions with their lecturers, students and host society. They were also asked to provide examples of their learning experience and ways of sharing information, knowledge, and practices with others. In all, eleven interviews were conducted in two phases in July 2015 and August 2016. All the conversations were recorded with an audio recording device. Each interview lasted about one hour and ten minutes. One set of interviews was conducted with the German exchange students at UDS, Tamale campus. In all, six out of the ten German exchange students were interviewed. Another set was conducted with the Ghanaian students who had returned from Germany. Ten Ghanaian students from UDS went on the exchange program; five of the ten were interviewed at UDS Tamale campus. The research participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Representation of interview subjects

Study subject code	Country code	Sex	Name of study program
UA	GD	M	empowerment studies
BW	GD	M	empowerment studies
CZ	GD	F	empowerment studies
TY	GD	M	empowerment studies
VC	GD	F	empowerment studies
MJ	GG	F	development education
KL	GG	F	development education
RT	GG	M	development education
SR	GG	M	development education
AG	GG	F	development education
PI	GG	M	development education

GG=Germany, GD=Ghana

The interviews were transcribed by listening to the audio recordings repeatedly. After the interview data was transcribed, it was then coded, organized into themes, categories, and sub-categories using the constant-comparison technique. Constant comparison refers to a process of maintaining a close connection between data and conceptualization so that the correspondence between concepts and categories is not lost (Bryman 2004, Abdulai et al. 2017). Using this technique, detailed, selective, and comprehensive reading of the entire transcribed data was done. After coding the data, we grouped it into themes. Classical content analysis was used to identify the main themes (Bryman 2004). The number of times each descriptive code occurred was ranked, and the most important concepts were identified as the

themes. For data interpretation, we adopted a hermeneutic or meaning-interpretation approach. Hermeneutics is the study of the interpretation of texts (see e.g. Neuman 2014). To make the interview data meaningful from the perspective of the interview participants, we quoted sections of the transcribed data and interpreted statements based on the responses of the participants.

3.2 Ethical considerations

Prior to the study, participants were given a letter of introduction that provided information about the research and what it meant to take part. All participants understood and agreed to take part. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary. Raw data (recordings and transcripts) were treated in a way that protected the anonymity of the study participants. We did not gather any personal data, such as names, ages, or addresses; and we removed any information that could make participants identifiable. The recordings were destroyed immediately after transcription.

4. Findings and discussion

In setting up the findings on cross-cultural learning experiences among exchange students from HSD in Germany and UDS in Ghana, we considered the key categories that were generated from the data. Those data were then discussed to reflect some of the theories used in the study and current empirical literature. In view of this, the following discussion is divided into three themes.

4.1 Theme One: Communication challenges under cultural coexistence

People have natural inclinations to be with similar others with whom they share common values, regulated by the same or familiar principles. Unfortunately, it is becoming common that people get disorientated by their removal from their comfort zones, as in this exchange program. What is usually taken for granted no longer holds, ushering in unfamiliar cultural encounters, which sometimes come with associated anxieties (Keles 2013, Alhassan 2011). The anxieties of creating common understandings with dissimilar others is inevitable. It is not surprising when one subject related that:

> *Mmm. I think I have an example where I said something where my colleague couldn't understand it. It was in a group work and we wanted to divide who will take which point and there was a misunderstanding and so two of us did the same point and one point was not worked on* (PI 11).

This is a clear case of misunderstanding so grievous that a task was left undone owing to the fact that effective communication could not be sustained even in face-to-face interaction. As cultures continue to differ so will the way people communicate and subsequent behaviors affected because of perceptual difference in the way people view the world (Keles 2013). Samovar and Porter's (1997) intercultural model postulates how meanings are lost when messages are encoded by a person in one culture and decoded by a person from a different culture in the context of their differing cultural backgrounds.

Adler (1991) is of the view that the wider the cultural orientation gaps between encoder and decoder, the greater the differences in meaning. Some scholars including Abdulai and colleagues (2019) are of the strong conviction that communication is even difficult between people who share a common language, evidence for which is revealed by the field data:

> *Yeah. I think sometimes there were challenges but I expected before that there will be more challenges because I am not used to do all in English. My English is not as well as your English. For example, I expected more problems with the communication. But, I think it was ok, and we could understand each other. Of*

> *course, sometimes there were some problems with words or we don't use the same words or used in another contexts, or something like this. But, I think it was not a big problem (CZ3).*

Based on similar studies (Abdulai et al. 2019, Abdulai & Ibrahim 2016, Samovar & Porter 1995), these researchers have argued that, even under the use of the same language, communication challenges may still be imminent on the grounds that the rules, principles and regulation of communication are determined by the social situation and culture. Despite the use of the English language by the exchange students from Germany and their Ghanaian counterparts, creating common meanings was still at a premium due to pronunciation and problems with slang. Abdulai and Ibrahim's (2016) study further reveals that Ghanaians have a unique way of speaking the English language, which may not sync well with the Germans. This was corroborated by a German participant:

> *Eee…when people say music is local here, to me, local is not a bad thing, it just means it is from here, but here when someone says the music is too local, it comes with a negative connotation. Or when I ask people what they like about music they will say they like the beats, but sometimes I find they mean the rhythm, but sometimes they mean the song. So, there have been examples where someone tells me something and I also have to figure out what they mean by what they say (MJ 6).*

The research participant was so challenged in trying to make her conversation understandable enough to her Ghanaian audience that she had to resort to non-verbal communication by way of gesture. Yet, this option was not helpful enough:

> *This morning I was trying to explain to the woman who does cleaning in my house that there was [sic] moles in my cupboard. She speaks English, but I think "moles" isn't the word she knows. So, I was trying to mime moles, I was trying to give hand signals, but I mean how do you give a hand signal for moles? It is very complicated, so I tried, but it didn't work, I had to show her the moles (KL7).*

Nonverbal communication is no exception to the principle that it is the social situation and culture that determine the rules, principles and regulations to communication. The respondent's frustration was occasioned by the difficulty creating meaning by both the encoder and decoder. Communicating via non-verbal behavior relies on tacit, culturally bound knowledge reposing in every person. It is only when a person is sufficiently oriented towards a new culture that he or she can encode and decode non-verbal behaviors with ease.

It is very frustrating for people to find themselves helplessly trying to communicate, but their efforts are yielding no results. People are often dumbfounded finding out systematic differences in perceptions with issues that are usually taken for granted, which end up building anxiety in communicating with people in new cultures (Rijamampianina 1999). When people are anxious because of new cultures they tend to feel awkward and pay attention to minor issues. This statement speaks to this issue of anxiety:

> *This for me is a bit disappointing. I also sometimes have the impression... may be due to the cultural differences, they do not take us seriously. They were laughing when we mentioned some arguments for example. so it was a bit disappointing .I had the impression that every time we say something for example may be something that is related to culture, people often felt offended immediately (SR 9).*

This is an expression of frustration from communication behaviors that may be considered inappropriate. The quotation above smacks of ethnocentrism or at least a cultural divide as expressed in the laughter. Neuliep and McCroskey (1997) maintain that cultural expressions

simply are embedded with some degree of ethnocentrism. People naturally filter verbal and nonverbal messages using their own cultures' biases, and by so doing end up judging aspects of others' cultures using their own cultures as the standard. Thoughts of negativity toward or superiority over other cultures bring about this phenomenon. Those who engaged in the laughter thought the arguments substandard as far as their cultural orientation was concerned. The feeling of displeasure by those laughed at was born out of anxiety in experiencing new cultures. For all you know, if those who engaged in the laughter and those who were being laughed at were to have shared the same culture, they would not have taken any offense.

4.2 Theme Two: Perceived differences in social value systems
People develop serious attachment to their values systems, which have far-reaching implications on their actions and inactions. This is because people's assumptions, needs and goals are shaped by their cultures of orientation, which are rooted deeply in the values they subscribe to. Values are significant, enduring and hard to change especially when they are palpable. The room arrangement style at the University for Development Studies, where all furniture faces the lecturer, emerged as a cause for concern cutting across most of the German students' responses. One respondent succinctly put it this way:

> *The seating arrangement differs from that of Germany. All seats are looking to the professor but* [I] *am used to sitting in* [a] *circle where students look at each other* (KL7).

Another respondent put it this way:

> *Um… my first impression was that it is not the same as in Germany. Um especially, the room was different. In Germany the rooms are smaller and the seats are sitting often in a circle and not behind each other and it looks very different* (AG10).

This perceived difference in room size and seating arrangement can be interpreted to reflect the difference in the system of values of the cultures involved. Room size and seating arrangement could appear as artifacts, but they may be rooted deeply in underlying assumptions, which could be conscious or unconscious (Schein 2004). A seating arrangement that is round, with people facing each other, demonstrates an equitable distribution of power and equal opportunity to speak. This cultural situation aptly fits the power-distance dimension advanced by Hofstede (1986). Hofstede explains that inequity prevails within every culture, but the extent to which it is tolerated differs from one culture to the other. The German cultures belong to the small power-distance classification, which implies that the teacher respects the student's independence. It is the student who is expected to initiate communication and speak at any point in the class. Ultimately, learning is judged to be effective based on the extent of two-way communication in class (Hofstede 1986). In high power-distance cultures such as Ghana and China, the situation is the opposite. The learning situation is teacher-centered, with the expectation on the teacher to initiate communication while the student only speaks up when permitted by the teacher. The effectiveness of the learning situation is judged by the teacher's excellence (Alhassan & Abosi 2014).

Closely related is a perceived difference in the value of respect. The German exchange students appeared confused about the way the Ghanaian students behaved towards their lecturers. This is how a respondent highlighted it:

> *And also the relations between the lecturer and the students is another issue. The problem is, I think it is more hierarchical here. I was not used to somebody carry, for example, the laptop of the lecturer and organize the beamer something like that. In Germany the lecturers do it* (PI 11).

To the Ghanaian, this is a show of respect, which is a social value firmly rooted in the Ghanaian culture, particularly the part of the country (Northern Region) where the university is situated. If you are raised in Ghana, assisting the elderly and the weak is one of the vital mental programs that will be inculcated into you. Aside from the fact that teachers are held in high esteem in Ghanaian culture, age is a serious factor when it comes to showing regard and respect. People willingly assist their lecturers, elders and all those in respected positions because of the social positions they occupy. In the Ghanaian hierarchy of values, such respect sits near the top. These behaviors were quite bizarre and outlandish to the German respondents and could not be taken as a mark of respect in their culture.

Another obvious perceived difference in social values concerns private space. One of the participants from Germany noticed how people could intrude into her private space:

> *I think in southern Ghana, personally, eeh… the way people interacted with me was not the best, they did not respect my space. So they touched me more, eeh…. It still happens in Tamale, but I experienced it less as I do in places like Accra* (KL 7).

Many cultures have consideration on how space is viewed, especially when it comes to the space to leave when communicating with someone and the act of touching. Some cultures allow for much private space and leave little space for public and vice versa. The respondent's statement could be interpreted to mean that she belongs to a culture that allows for much private space and frowns upon unexpected touching. She expected to maintain a comfortable zone when engaging in face-to-face talks and considered unexpected touching as an embarrassment and invasion of privacy, even if well intentioned -- even as such behavior is considered normal by most Ghanaians, particularly the youth, who take it for granted and assume it as part of their usual demeanor. This kind of demeanor belongs to the category of values that are held or exhibited unconsciously; but the impact on the new culture is significant. Embedded in this respondent's statement is an experience of different values within the same national culture. The respondent appears to attribute disregard for her private space and unexpected touching to prevail more in the southern part of Ghana and less in the north, which she thinks could be born out of religious values.

The Ghanaian students likewise realized that there are aspects of the German culture worthy of emulation and others they did not appreciate, as evidenced in this statement:

> *But when it comes to culture and socialization, well, there are some of their cultures we really admired Their sense of urgency, their responsiveness to issues, their maintenance culture, sanitary, thus, the way they maintain their environment are things that we can learn from them. But the other side is that they live very individualistic life, so it happen that you can stay in a flat with somebody for more than one year, you will not even have opportunity to chat with the person and to me that is very bad because as one who believes in communal values…* (UA 1).

The Ghanaian students realized that the Germans were imbued with a swift sense of urgency, with good ambience and cleanliness, which they felt like having as part of their own culture. Conversely, the Ghanaians disliked the individualistic aspect of the German culture, since they believed in communalism. As globalization exposes people to other cultures, people will find some aspects of other cultures to be good and desirable while repudiating others.

4.3 Theme Three: Time, tasks and agreements
Just as different cultures have different conceptions and assumptions about how people relate to one another, so is their approach to agreements, tasks and time. The interview data revealed that the students from HSD in Germany and UDS in Ghana had different conceptions of and approaches to agreements, tasks and time. As a German exchange student explained:

> *I observed that often my colleagues and I from Germany were the first in the classroom before the Ghanaian students. Sometimes the lecturers were also late without apologizing to students* (MJ6).

The above interview excerpt not only reveals the commitment of the German students to time concerning lectures and other meetings, but it also exposes some Ghanaian students' and lecturers' relatively lax attitudes to time and thereby reporting late. The statement further points out that those lecturers who usually showed up late to lectures did not often care to apologize to students for their actions, but rather saw their behavior as normal. This understanding is congruent with Hall`s (1976) postulation that monochronic cultures like Germany's view time as a linear process and tend to do one thing at a time (see also Ting-Toomey 1999). These cultures see time as something that can be compartmentalized between tasks, personal and social dimensions, and plotted towards future events and activities. The German students whose culture is rooted in monochronic philosophy are most likely to consider time as a precious and scarce commodity and not have a negative attitude to time. To the contrary, the Ghanaian students are most likely not to put their activities in a sequential plan to realize their desired goals and not value time as a precious and scarce commodity, because they are socialized in a polychronic time philosophy. Most Ghanaian students in a Ghanaian context are not slaves to time, but rather may use time to guide them to structure their daily activities. A Ghanaian exchange student at HSD in Germany was asked about her opinion of the commitment of the German students to time. She explained:

> *The Germans are very transparent and committed to whatever they planned to do. If they agreed with you to do something at say 6 o'clock the next day, eeh… they will do as planned. They are very different when it comes to commitment to time and plans. Eeh…they are not like us* (VC 5).

In her opinion, the German students ẃere more committed to time and plans. The German students' commitment to time and plans, and their conception of time as something precious and scarce, may be attributed to their upbringing or acculturation. The economic value of time may be embedded in the German social system, which has been transmitted from generation to generation. When a question was asked about the time students spent during lectures, a German student said:

> *Usually, students spent 1 hour 30mins for a lecture at HSD, but sitting for three hours for a lecturer without a break at the University for Development studies is tiresome* (RT8).

The German students were not comfortable with lectures which extended beyond 1:30 minutes without break. In their view, a lecture which extends beyond 1:30 minutes not only affects teaching and learning, but makes it difficult for students to assimilate what has been taught. In Ghana, most students and lecturers are used to long hours for lectures, because most lecturers do not start lectures at the start of the semester. In some cases, lectures may start in the middle of the semester, and this may compel the lecturer to go beyond the time scheduled for the course.

Review of the interview data illuminated different conceptions and understandings of tasks and agreements between the German and Ghanaian students. The interviewees were asked to share their experiences regarding group work; two of the German students had this to say:

> *We were given a group assignment and my impression was that our colleagues from Ghana were not well prepared for the group work. When they are assigned to do something, they simply do not inform themselves about what they have to*

talk about. Sometimes, I have the impression that they rely on us because they are aware we will be well prepared (AG10).

Emm… in fact I sometimes get disappointed in my Ghanaian colleagues. I cannot hide this. Especially, when the course is about development education and social change (SR 9).

The view expressed suggests that some of the students they had worked with in groups were ill-prepared for group assignments, presentations and discussions. This is in harmony with Hofstede`s (1997) concept of cultural awareness, which holds that individuals carry different "mental software" because of the way they were brought up. Differences in students' socialization processes can have an effect on approaches to group work. This also resonates with Kolb's (1984) postulation that cultures cannot be acquired without learning, and learning cannot take place without sociocultural context. The inability of Ghanaian students to contribute effectively during group discussions and presentations may be attributed to their teacher-centered education culture, as against the student-centered educational approach practiced in Germany.

This raises significant questions about the institutional culture of Ghanaian universities. School culture and social structure, as Banks (2007: 95) contends, are powerful determining factors for "how students learn to perceive themselves". It is imperative that lecturers have pedagogical competence toward improving social interactions among students and between students and lecturers (Alhassan & Abosi 2014).

The views expressed by the German students can be interpreted to mean that they were disappointed in the work culture of some Ghanaian students. The second respondent in particular suggests that development education and social change students should be agents of change and good ambassadors for development.

The same question was asked to the Ghanaian students who went to Germany, and one of the interview subjects revealed:

Err… they start agreement with trust. Right from the moment you start agreement with them, they trust that you are going to do your part as they also do their part. So there is no suspicion right from the beginning of the agreement (BW 2).

The statement may be interpreted to mean that Germans are highly committed to agreement, and their commitment to agreement is based on trust. It implies that, in the context of German culture, agreements are like social contracts for the parties who have agreed to execute an action.

5. Conclusion

This paper discusses cross-cultural experiences between students involved in an exchange program between universities in Germany and Ghana. Clearly, the students from the two universities exhibited different conceptualizations and approaches to agreements, tasks and time. The exchange students from Germany exhibited a high commitment to agreements, tasks and time, while their Ghanaian counterparts (teachers and students) were doing the direct opposite. Essentially, the communication process was muddled by incidents of ineffective communication, which resulted in unproductive outcomes for group assignments. Perceived value differences were also evident, informed by differences in values of certain social structures. The students from Germany and Ghana differed sharply on the notion of respect and how it should be extended to superiors, based on the different mental programming of their respective cultural orientations. The power relations within the two universities – hierarchical versus flat teacher-student relationships – were obvious. Likewise discernible was the perceived difference in managing personal space.

We recommend that, in exchange programs of this nature, cultural learning about other cultures should be taken seriously by both students and teachers to avoid culture shock, misunderstanding, miscommunication and relational conflict. In creating a conducive teaching and learning environment, institutions should take into consideration the social value structures of the cultures involved so as to provide an enabling environment cutting across all the cultures concerned.

5.1 Limitations of the study

It is important that the study be carefully interpreted, given that it seeks to explore only the experiences, perceptions and opinions of exchange students from the UDS in Ghana and HSD in Germany, in terms of their cross-cultural experiences. Generalizing the findings beyond the experiences of the exchange students from these institutions is not possible. The situation encountered here might or might not be applicable to other situations. A sample size of eleven is relatively small. Nonetheless, future researchers can build on our findings.

5.2 Recommendations for future research

A high level of commitment to agreements, tasks and time is desirable, with high yielding prospects for productivity and intercultural cohesion and harmony. Future research could explore the deep-rooted cultural assumptions of German students that explain their high proclivity to keeping to agreements, tasks and time commitments and that of Ghanaian students and lecturers' *laissez faire* attitude to agreements, tasks and time.

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