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Boundary talk in Life (dis)Orientation: Collaborative conversations across Higher Education Institutions

Authors:
Janet Jarvis[1]
Sarina de Jager[2]

Affiliations:
[1]Discipline of Life Orientation Education, School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

[2]Department of Humanities Education, Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Janet Jarvis,
jarvisj@ukzn.ac.za

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Life Orientation (LO) as a compulsory subject in the South African school curriculum (Grades 7–12) aims to develop the learner's self-in-society. This implies a holistic approach that includes the personal, social and physical development of the learner. In most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), LO is not offered as a specialisation that includes these three broad aspects of development. In many cases, the emphasis rests with personal development, focusing, in particular, on modules taken in Psychology. Physical Education, if it is included in any LO programme, usually falls within the ambit of Sports/Human Movement Science programmes. The social development aspect is, by and large, omitted and Human Rights Education, including Religion Education and Citizenship Education, is neglected. Alternatively, pre-service teachers are required to select from a smorgasbord of modules and they often graduate without having included all three broad aspects of this specialisation. This article speaks to the importance of collaborative relationships across HEIs with a view to meaningful boundary talk that can be transformative in nature and provide the platform for research ventures. This collaboration that commenced as a community of two in conversation, led to a community of many in conversation, in the form of a national colloquium in 2020 that focused on LO in the HEI space. This article presents the themes emerging from this colloquium and recommends that transdisciplinary knowledge can lead to transdisciplinary education that serves the mandate of the LO specialisation in HEIs, namely, to prepare pre-service LO teachers.

Keywords: boundary talk; collaboration; Higher Education Institutions; Life Orientation; transdisciplinarity.

Introduction

Life Orientation (LO) was introduced in 1997 as part of the first democratic curriculum (Curriculum 2005), the aim of which was to prepare learners in a holistic manner for life outside the school context. Life Orientation was introduced in 2002 in Grades 4–9 to address specifically, the contents of human rights and democracy, and to awaken sensitivity to democratic processes in a human rights culture. In 2006, LO was phased into the Further Education and Training Phase, centering around the 'self in relation to others and to society'.[1] Currently Life Skills is offered in Grades R-6 and LO in Grades 7–12. The introduction of LO tasked schools with the development of the whole person, placing personal and individual needs in a social context to encourage the acceptance of diversity and to promote the quality of life for all.[2] LO is a multidisciplinary subject, embedded in a variety of disciplines including Sociology, Psychology, Religious Studies, Political Science, Anthropology, Philosophy, Labour Studies, and Sports Science/Human Movement Studies. Ideally, LO pre-service teachers need to be exposed to in-depth theoretical knowledge across this spectrum of disciplines. They are expected to be able to integrate curriculum topics with the foundational knowledge of these various disciplines.[3] Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are mandated to offer a comprehensive and balanced curriculum that encompasses the personal, social and physical development of the learner, and to address the under-theorisation of LO as a school subject.

Various factors can account for the poor implementation of LO in schools, not least inadequately prepared LO teachers. In many schools, principals do not appoint qualified LO teachers but rather assign LO to staff members as timetable fillers. These teachers/staff members are not qualified to present this multi-disciplinary subject and often approach LO by preaching to learners about their opinions regarding topics including sex before marriage/teenage pregnancy, substance abuse and so forth. In many schools, LO periods in the timetable are used as catch-up time for other subjects in the curriculum that are deemed to be more important. In some cases, learners are given LO periods in which to complete their homework. The use of LO time to set up school halls for parent meetings and the like also contributes to the impression that LO is not an important subject.

Add to this the hidden or null curriculum that is offered by even trained LO teachers, it is not surprising that LO has acquired the low status that it carries to the extent of the subject not bearing points for university entrance.[4,5,6,7,8] This low status afforded to LO is perpetuated at HEIs also. Life Orientation is often considered as a subject that can be taught by anybody and that it does not require specialised lecturers. Due to the fact that LO is not a defined field of study or discipline in and of itself, with strong theoretical underpinnings, the subject is neglected or at best fragmented and pre-service teachers are ill-prepared to teach the subject meaningfully in schools.

Even with ongoing curricular revisions, the aim and purpose of LO remains the same, with an emphasis on the holistic development of the learner. This, in response to the Department of Basic Education's[1] directive to develop a balanced and confident learner who can contribute to a just and democratic society, a productive economy and an improved quality of life for all. Life Orientation further strives to work towards the transformation and development of society through education.[9]

In the interests of preparing pre-service teachers to teach LO meaningfully and substantially, this article argues for the importance of collaboration between HEIs and addresses the following research questions:

- Why is it important to work collaboratively across institutions?
- How can collaborative work across institutions take place?

These questions were initially addressed with the collaboration between two colleagues representing two HEIs, and this led to the successful facilitation of a national colloquium that included academics involved in LO from seven HEIs in South Africa. The findings presented in this article relate, in the first instance, to the community of two in conversation and then to that of a greater community in conversation.[10] The process adopted will be presented and also the theory underpinning these interactions.

Theoretical framework

This article draws on a theoretical framework that supports both collaboration and also transdisciplinarity. The complexity and networked nature of our time, as well as the changing nature of knowledge, seems to demand new patterns of working.[11] Further, the challenges brought forward by the pressure of globalisation and the shift to a knowledge-based economy has demanded that HEIs adopt innovative methods that can result in more efficient production and diffusion of knowledge.[12] Power and Handley[13] advocate for a joined-up approach to overcome institutional, individual, and discipline based barriers to knowledge production and innovation. Collaboration is a process of joint decision-making that requires time, negotiation, trust and effective communication. Collaboration involves a long-term commitment to working towards a common vision or goal that is grounded in a common philosophy that results in something new.[14] All parties in the process are learners, and the outcome is to improve professional conversation.[15]

In the Higher Education (HE) context, the advantages of working collaboratively include cross-fertilisation of ideas and enthusiasm and momentum generated through professional conversation and the possibility that the process could be just as important and fruitful as the outcome. Collaboration includes the importance of coming together to solve complex issues. It is as much about the journey as the destination.[16] Trust and healthy interpersonal connections are imperative to the development of a firm foundation for collaborative working with the personal considered to be as important as the procedural. Whilst collaboration's individual characteristics make it appealing for all parties involved, achieving broader success and having a significant impact through the collaborative process means aiming for individual, institutional, and national impact.[17]

Insofar as HE consists of work at the boundaries (not least in LO), the tasks of knowledge creation and conceptualisation are necessary and important work. Serving a colonial agenda, discrete disciplines have been maintained in HEIs with possibly intradisciplinary (within the same discipline) debate taking place. In some instances, interdisciplinary (between disciplines) debate had led to the possible transference of a synthesis of knowledge in which understandings change in response to the perspectives of others. Primarily, however, according to Nicolescu, interdisciplinarity 'concerns the transfer of methods from one discipline to another … but its goal still remains within the framework of disciplinary research …'[18 (p. 187)] Interdisciplinarity does not necessarily constitute meaningful boundary talk between disciplines. A multidisciplinary approach concerns studying a particular research topic in several disciplines at the same time. Whilst multidisciplinarity involves a number of different disciplines coming together, each disciplinary group works primarily with its own framings and methods.[18 (p. 187)] A multidisciplinary approach, whilst overflowing disciplinary boundaries, has 'its goal remaining limited to the framework of disciplinary research'.[19 (p. 5)]

In a subject like LO, it is vital that the currently discreet disciplines of Psychology, Sociology, and Sports/Human Movement Science engage in disciplinary boundary talk. The difficulties encountered at disciplinary boundaries, or border troubles,[20] involve the epistemological structuring of disciplines and the privileging of certain frames of enquiry and methodological approaches. Transdisciplinary engagement, transcending disciplinary boundaries, strives to solve problems[21] by generating new transdisciplinary knowledges[19] in the space *between*, *across* and *beyond* academic disciplines.[18,19,21] Transdisciplinary knowledge can lead to transdisciplinary education that serves the mandate of LO to develop the learner holistically and to prepare them as far as possible for society that is diverse and multi-faceted.

Methodology

This article employs an interpretive approach recognising that an individual's thoughts and perceptions are more significant than 'external, objective conditions and structural forces'.[22 (p. 104)] Empathetic, reflective, conversation facilitated the process. An empathetic approach refers to the capacity to understand and respond to another person with an increased awareness of their position and concerns and that this matters.[23] Reflection implies thinking through something with the aim of bringing improvement. The colleagues met in a safe space, not just physically, but also figuratively where they could be open with one another without fear of posturing, and where the one colleague, in particular, could unburden herself with regard to her concerns pertaining to the way in which LO was not being accommodated at the HEI in which she worked.[24,25]

In 2016, the LO discipline coordinators from two South African universities (referred to as X and Y respectively) met to discuss the shape of the curriculum on offer at one of the HEI (X). A community of two in conversation was born. This community provided the opportunity for an informal sharing of information in conversation in a safe space.[10,24] The conversation provided the opportunity for negotiation and collaboration.[26] Informally exchanging perspectives and personal experiences, fostered respect, trust and tolerant understanding as 'divergent ways of thinking and speaking' were reflected upon.[27 (p. 522)] This reflection entailed the examination of current practices, beliefs and premises, and a reciprocal exchange resulted in the integration of new understandings into experience.[27] The community in conversation was then extended to additional colleagues at HEI X. The HEI Y model of LO offerings was shared and a conversation ensued to address the theoretical and conceptual imbalance in the LO discipline offering at HEI X, with pure psychology dominating module content. Conversations continued virtually from then on, via Zoom and a relationship of trust and collegiality emerged between the initial two colleagues, in particular, from the two HEIs. Realising the benefit of this collaboration the colleagues then embarked on organising a national conversation for LO colleagues in HEIs. This took the shape of an LO colloquium. Whilst it was envisaged that this would take place in a physical venue, with an opportunity for colleagues to engage informally over lunch between sessions, COVID-19 played a role in changing the shape of the day. The LO colloquium took place via Zoom in the latter half of 2020. An email call was sent by the two colleagues from HEI X and Y to all those involved in LO in HEIs nationwide. Invitations were sent to 11 HEIs and colleagues from 7 responded.

The event started with a plenary session setting the scene for the colloquium. Participants were informed as to the aim of the colloquium, namely to connect by way of conversation and to network across HEIs. The introduction included rules of engagement that emphasised that this was a community in conversation in a safe space without posturing. Participants were encouraged that they have a voice whether they are a seasoned academic or novice.

The participants were informed about three Zoom breakaway groups to facilitate more opportunity for interaction than would have been the case in the plenary group session. These groups each focused on the personal, social and physical development aspects of LO. Participants were informed that the sessions would be recorded and they consented to this. The identity of the participants and their respective HEIs were kept anonymous.

The process adopted in the breakaway groups included the following: introductions that included the participant's name, HEI affiliation, areas of responsibility and expertise, teaching-learning/research interests and responsibilities with regard to LO. Participants were also asked to present the structure of the LO offering in their particular HEI and to say whether it was offered at postgraduate level, in the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and undergraduate level and, if so, in which phases. Participants described how the personal, social and physical aspects of LO were integrated (or not), and the time allocated to each aspect. Theoretical and methodological frameworks employed in teaching LO and related scholarship and research in LO also formed part of the conversation. Participants spoke about challenges and opportunities in teaching-learning LO at tertiary level and considered how in the future, LO could possibly be shaped in HEIs.

The recordings of the breakaway groups were transcribed for ease of analysis. A thematic analysis of the data was employed. In the findings and discussion presented below, pseudonyms are used to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

Findings and discussion

Emanating from boundary talk in Life (dis)Orientation, initially between two colleagues in two HEIs (X and Y) and then based on the boundary talk that took place in the colloquium, the following findings and discussion are presented.

Community of two in conversation

The colleague from HEI Y started teaching before the inception of Curriculum 2005. As a lecturer in curriculum studies, with a focus on religious diversity, she was drawn in to develop modules that focused on the social development aspects of LO. The personal development aspects were managed by colleagues in Educational Psychology and the physical development aspects by the colleagues in the Sports Science discipline. Each wanted to maintain these as discreet disciplines. It took many years and difficult boundary talk to eventually overcome boundary troubles to get to the point of creating LO as a holistic offering, with colleagues responsible for the various distinct, yet integrated, aspects of LO. Currently, LO is offered in the Undergraduate (Senior Phase and FET), PGCE (FET phase) and Honours programmes. Fifty (50) per cent of the curriculum is dedicated to Physical Education (PE), as is the practice in the school curriculum. This also responds to the national directive to address the physical development needs of children.

The colleague from HEI X comes from an Educational Psychology background. The LO theory curriculum that was encountered at HEI X had been developed by various lecturers over the years, as the subject migrated between different disciplines, with a strong emphasis on Psychology and personal development, and a lack of content regarding social development. Life Orientation consisted primarily of psychology modules offered to undergraduate students in their 3rd and 4th years of study. Certain Sports Science modules were also taken. The social development aspect of LO was non-existent.

The collaboration between the two colleagues began with a crisis in 2016 when an external moderator was sought for LO related modules. As a result of the collaboration that ensued, restructuring has taken place at HEI X with the curriculum having been reconceptualised to include the missing social dimension and a reconsideration of the psychology focus and content. The LO course is now weighted with 50% thereof allocated to theory modules that cover social and personal development, and 50%, PE. On a postgraduate level, LO is offered as a module in one of the Honours programmes in Humanities Education.

Collaboration has not only resulted in a revised or new LO curricula in HEIs, but more significantly, it has been a process during which a trust relationship has been forged.[16] This has taken place over time, respectful interaction and effective, tolerant and caring communication.[15] This collaborative relationship has led to further nationwide collaboration in the interests of LO. Increasingly mindful of the benefits of collaboration, including external moderation, examination of post graduate work and so forth, the two colleagues conceived of the idea to arrange a nationwide colloquium. The impact of the initial collaborative process was therefore far-reaching, not only inspiring a trust relationship between two colleagues from different HEIs and the restructuring of the curriculum on institutional level, but extending this to create a space for conversation between colleagues from seven HEIs, across four provinces in South Africa. The possibility exists for the implementation of actionable interventions through the creation of lasting and comprehensive partnerships.[17]

Community of many in conversation

All of the seven HEIs that participated in the colloquium, offer LO at the undergraduate level. Five of the HEIs offer the subject in the PGCE programme. Five of the HEIs offer LO at a postgraduate level, with two HEIs offering a specific elective specialisation in PE. Two of the HEIs offer a full LO honours programme.

Those HEIs offering a PGCE specialisation in LO strongly recommended that non-education undergraduate students should be alerted to the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) PGCE entry requirements so that they can register for the correct subjects at the correct level in their undergraduate degrees.

The following main themes emerged from the conversations in the three breakaway groups: (1) the need for collaboration across HEIs, including research initiatives; (2) the status of LO in HEIs; (3) PE should be a standalone subject.

The need for collaboration across Higher Education Institutions

The need for collaboration between LO lecturers at HEIs, including research, was supported. It was noted that research was taking place in silos and that there was room for collaborative research initiatives. It was also considered to be of utmost importance that scholarship be showcased to raise the status of LO in HEIs. One participant suggested there should be more research initiatives taking place across HEIs and referred to academics involved in LO as:

> '... each sitting in our little pods doing our own thing ...' (Marietjie)

Working in a transdisciplinary way would create the opportunity to share in the process of knowledge creation *between*, *across* and *beyond* academic disciplines.[18,19,21]

The same participant made a case for HEIs to work together with 'open hands' to see what possibilities there are to collaborate, saying that:

> '... if there's no collaboration, one university is going that way the other one is going that [*way*] ...' (Marietjie)

Colleagues shared about their research interests and the theoretical and methodological frameworks that they used. The hope was expressed that collaborative relationships would be birthed from the colloquium not only for research but also in terms of providing a pool of external moderators and postgraduate examiners. Collaboration would also provide the opportunity for sharing teaching-learning ideas and methodologies.

In particular, discussion centred on working in a way that was decolonial in nature. This could include research projects that are transdisciplinary in nature employing methodologies that empower students to be agents of their own learning.

A participant elsewhere in South Africa who works increasingly with visual methodologies, explained that they don't present lectures but they get their students involved. Thabile said:

> '… they produce the knowledge and they co-create the knowledges and challenge each other, and then I find teaching moments in the discussions and take it on like that so it makes for lively discussions and interesting research.' (Thabile)

Thabile said that she did not simply start teaching the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) curriculum but rather highlighted specific topics with her students that they discussed as they sat in a circle in what she refers to as their 'meeting space' as opposed to a lecture venue. This learning together with the students, as opposed to a top down approach, serves a decolonial approach. The importance of using narrative, and telling our stories was emphasised.

Research that is decolonial in nature addresses patriarchal attitudes and dispels the myth of African inferiority by drawing on indigenous knowledges and research methodologies:

> 'I think it's good that we're aware of what one another are doing so that we not always drawing on articles from people overseas... but rather that we are using work which has been generated in our country that is contextually relevant to our students.' (Nick)

It is important for lecturers to model reflection and reflexivity in their own teaching to promote classroom praxis.[28] The importance of praxis was stressed by Gillian, who said that:

> '… we've got a fighting chance at changing the technicist classroom practice that is currently taking place in the schools and also in HEIs, into classroom praxis... where attitudes can actually be transformed in the classroom with the potential of bringing about transformation in the wider society.' (Gillian)

Those participants focusing on the personal development aspects of LO stressed the need for the pre-service LO teacher to be equipped to support learners emotionally. More often than not it is the LO teacher that is approached to provide a pastoral role and emotional support to learners. This places a responsibility on HEIs to equip pre-service LO teachers for this role. Normah expressed this as follows:

> 'LO teachers are sometimes the first people that learners go to when they have challenges…they need to be capacitated with basic listening and reflection skills, and the process of referral.' (Normah)

It was also stressed that the sensitive topics covered in the curriculum need to be discussed and presented with care. Maureen, cautioned against LO students who often teach from a distinct personal point of view:

> ' They [*the students*] shouldn't bring too much emotion into it… when I say emotion I speak specifically about their personal views. Preaching instead of teaching.' (Maureen)

The participants seemed to agree that a well-rounded education in LO is imperative. Zama, in particular, said that students choose LO:

> '... because it is such a multi-disciplinary subject and it's so holistic, and it links with other subjects and methodologies.' (Zama)

It was also mentioned that students seem to experience personal development and self-transcendence through their LO studies:

> 'I experience that students tell me that it wasn't their idea to teach LO, but … they went through the years of training and that is what they want to do now, because they think they can make a difference and be an agent of change.' (Normah)

Participants were in agreement that the importance of the LO curriculum should not be underestimated. Life Orientation subject matter requires students to develop emotional intelligence and self-awareness in order to successfully facilitate both the content and the important conversations pertaining to contextually relevant lived experience.

The status of Life Orientation in Higher Education Institutions

There is a negative connotation linked with the name 'Life Orientation', and this dissuades students from applying for this specialisation. The low status of LO in many schools as a subject that is accorded little value, has translated into HEIs. The recommendation was made by participants in the social development focus group, that a name change should be considered:

> '… maybe the issue is the name LO … when students see the name LO they connect so many negative connotations to it … there will not be posts for LO teachers in the future. That is why they don't opt to do LO.' (Sabelo)

A trend at some of the HEIs seems to be that LO is being discontinued as a methodology option in certain programmes. The main reason being that the perception exists that the market is saturated with LO teachers. At one of the HEIs in Gauteng, LO has been discontinued as part of the PGCE programme because of a large influx of applications from students who completed degrees in the Humanities and Psychology. These students often do not qualify for a second methodology and are therefore only qualified to teach LO:

> '… these students [*those that only have LO as a subject*] are not very employable. The decision was therefore made to discontinue the subject.' (Thabo)

In agreement, another participant added that:

> '… the students I think are the ones who are not so keen on LO … because of the attitudes they get in the schools and … when they have to attend lectures at varsity it's like … they always say they can learn it on the street they don't have to attend the lectures. Some of the lecturers also reinforce that line of thinking that it is an unnecessary module.' (Keshnie)

Located at a large inland, urban HEIs one participant said that HEIs did not take LO seriously and she blamed both the government and schools for this lack of interest:

> '… at our universities also we won't take it serious based on what we get from the … government and also from what we get from the schools.' (Boitumelo)

A participant from another inland HEI suggested that changing the name of LO at HEIs could draw more serious candidates to the subject. He suggested the following:

> '… we should have diversity in human rights education as the name... that is what I was thinking about. Under diversity and human rights education, you can include all the other issues of LO ...' (Johan)

Another supported this reiterating that the:

> '… whole naming is important in how people view the subject itself and maybe in our thinking as the way forward, we should really think about the naming to promote the status of LO ... so that it is not seen as a by the way. It is an important subject, very necessary ... so I think let's do something with the naming to improve the standard and positioning of LO.' (Clinton)

A participant from an inland HEI mentions that their approach to admission of LO students has recently changed:

> 'We expected them [*students*] to have a minimum average of 65% in their degrees to be admitted to LO in the PGCE programme. The reason that was decided was because of the high number of applications for LO … we realised we weren't going to be able to assure them of a position when they are done with their studies.' (Nina)

A trend across HEIs in their PGCE programmes seem to be that students are not allowed to take only LO as a subject, they need to take a second school subject. The participant explains:

> 'We are becoming weary of admitting students for the PGCE programme who can only teach LO. I wonder what that says about how the way we treat LO as a subject.' (Keshnie)

Another participant from a different HEI reiterated this point by stating:

> 'We expect of them to have another methodology, not only LO … out there it's a minefield for the LO teacher if you don't have other skills and knowledge as well.' (Zama)

A further perception that exists within the subject area in the HE space is that certain students choose the subject because they perceive it to be easy and attainable. Participants in the personal development breakaway group expressed concern about this trend, as this often leads those students to the lecture room that do not take the subject seriously. This is demotivating to lecturers, and fellow students who are passionate about LO. Participants also mentioned that the interest in postgraduate studies in LO seems to lean towards PE. Students who opt to complete further studies on topics such as personal development and social development seem to be few, and the numbers seem to be on the decline. Inevitably this has broader implications in the HE context such as funding and feasibility of the programmes.

Maureen from one of the coastal HEIs went on to say that as a member of the HEI transformation task team, in her LO modules, she looks at issues of gender transformation and identity, and rethinking the way in which students and staff consider one another. It was acknowledged that additional important topics such as that of inclusivity, environmental health, democratic citizenship, and human rights education all fall within the ambit of LO.

Physical Education should be a stand-alone subject

Participants in the PE conversation emphasised that the multidisciplinary nature of LO often leads to fragmentation in the HE curriculum. Physical Education is mostly located within a different department than that offering the social and personal aspects of the subject. Participants in this conversation group felt strongly that PE should be a subject on its own, 'a stand-alone subject', especially considering the fact that it is a very specialised field. This sentiment was supported by Andries who stated the following:

> 'The fact that we do not have PE as a standalone specialisation means that there is less time [*to teach*] in terms of the content. My vision would be to have a standalone PE where you can focus on all the disciplines that make up the subject.' (Andries)

Some HEIs report a larger emphasis on PE, whereas others report that their institution focuses more on social and personal development. A major concern for participants in the PE conversation was the interpretation of the CAPS document, which they felt was insufficient. One participant, explained that CAPS is a huge drawback and that:

> '... there are not sufficient guidelines.' (Sbu)

Another agreed, and said that:

> 'We are all experiencing the problem of the interpretation of CAPS, for PE it is really not sufficient.' (Xolani)

Other challenges experienced in PE include finding new initiatives required for teaching the discipline via distance education, and teaching to large groups of students:

> 'You have to be innovative and creative in how you present PE… to large groups of students.' (Zama)

The COVID-19 pandemic also seems to have brought challenges to teaching. One participant commented on how teaching PE took place during the pandemic:

> 'They had to create virtual lessons ... and it worked to some extent, however, it's not perfect … we still need to see how it goes.' (Rossly)

Participants also mentioned that there is a need for LO in-service teachers to be trained in the PE component of LO. Many in-service teachers teaching LO are not trained in the subject, and so HEIs are resorting to offering short courses in LO to address the gap:

> 'We realised that there is a huge need for LO teachers responsible for the PE component to be further trained … because they get a very small piece of training by the DoE.' (Frankie)

A participant from an HEI in Gauteng agreed saying that:

> '... there are teachers out there with no PE experience at all.' (Rene)

Those who participated in the PE conversation felt that the subject does not always receive the credit it deserves. The majority of colleagues seem to lean towards PE functioning as a separate subject entirely. They were of the opinion that the personal and social development aspects of LO were taking away valuable time from PE. Colleagues also all agreed on the issues that exist in PE on a policy level, and that intervention is required from the DoE. Participants expressed the view that there is a need for more postgraduate students in PE programmes so that expertise in PE can be encouraged. There seems to be an impasse in the LO conversation regarding the relationship between PE and social and personal development. Life Orientation is considered to have lower or no status when compared with Sports Science/ Human Movement Studies. The frustration experienced is that PE can only be offered through LO. To try to resolve this, in some HEIs PE is allocated 50% of the LO specialisation.

Identity crisis in Life Orientation in Higher Education Institutions

Unlike pure disciplines such as Mathematics and Science, LO is a new subject shaped by a synthesis of a multiplicity of topics underpinned by various discreet disciplines. A transdisciplinary approach would go a long way to facilitating holistic engagement that creates new knowledges between, across and beyond discreet fields of study.[18] By doing so, a decolonial agenda is supported with a view to developing the learner holistically within an African context. What became apparent in all three breakaway groups is that lecturers find it challenging to facilitate LO in this way. Rooted as they are, in specific discipline-based methodologies and theoretical frameworks, engaging in transdisciplinary boundary talk can result in a measure of disorientation. In an academic context where LO is not necessarily a best fit, migrating as it does between disciplines, ongoing collaborative conversation can help to orientate this specialisation.

The status of LO ushers in another layer of complexity. The inferior status that LO carries in the majority of schools where it has been poorly implemented has infected HEIs, to the point that LO is excluded from the admission point score.[4,5,6,7,8] In addition, LO lecturers are more often than not, looked down on by their colleagues located in historically well-established disciplines:

> 'I am often made to feel that by offering LO, the work that I am doing is not valued as important, lacking academic status. However, when colleagues in the humanities want to collect data for projects pertaining to sexuality education, gender-based violence and so forth, they ask to work with LO students.' (Carina)

This ambiguity, double-standard and lack of recognition also contributes to LO lecturers feeling disorientated.

The ongoing debates about the viability of LO and possibly replacing LO with History Education, for example, is also destabilising and endorses the stereotype that LO is expendable. This leads to an identity crisis for both the subject and those teaching the same. In response, LO lecturers tend to align themselves with the 'distinct' fields of study as opposed to adopting a holistic approach to LO. This was made particularly clear with regard to PE which prefers to position itself as part of Sports Science/Human Movement Studies. Participants who specialise in the personal development aspects of LO position themselves and generate outputs specifically in the field of Psychology. Participants located in areas such as Human Rights Education, Religion Education, and Gender Education appeared to be far more comfortable with a transdisciplinary approach to LO. This could be attributed to their understanding of the diversity and intersectionality in society.

How can this identity crisis on the part of both LO as a specialisation and on the part of the lecturers be addressed? The authors posit that this could be achieved by building cohesion. Transdisciplinary boundary talk could encourage the growth of LO as a multidisciplinary specialisation in its own right. What makes LO so unique is that it demands courageous conversations about complex issues.[29] Cohesion could also be shaped and given gravitas through growing a body of scholarship related LO as a specialisation in HEIs. In addition, perhaps as suggested in the colloquium, a new identity could be created for LO. This could begin with the renaming of the specialisation in HE and developing scholarship that is transdisciplinary and decolonial in nature.

Conclusion

In answering the research questions posed at the beginning of this article, the authors argue that it is vitally important for collaboration to take place across HEIs in the interest of bringing a synthesis to the seeming disparity in LO offerings. The community of two in conversation and the community of many in conversation demonstrated how this collaboration can begin and press ahead. Colleagues who were working in silos, as identified during the colloquium and who experienced something of a disorientation with regard to their identity as LO lecturers, participated in a conversation in a safe space. There they could openly share the challenges, concerns and complexities that they have encountered. These conversations added to the well-being of the participants, as they established a sense of connection with one another.

Post the colloquium, contact lists, as well as lists of publications contributing to current scholarship in LO, and a summary of salient points raised at the colloquium were disseminated to the participants. The community of two from HEIs X and Y secured a special issue of a journal to focus on LO specifically, providing an opportunity for academics to share their research. It is reasonable to anticipate that this could lead to future collaborative research ventures. Suggestions have also been invited for the focus of a second colloquium. Whilst much research has taken place with regard to Life (dis)Orientation in schools, there is room for further critical conversations in HEIs. Collaboration offers possibilities for benchmarking across HEIs, shared research projects and continued scholarship.

This article draws on the lived experience of collaboration between the authors. They contend that ongoing dialogical conversations between LO lecturers in HEIs are important, but can only take place effectively through authentic, respectful, and caring relationships. Their recommendation is that in order to re-orientate LO in the HEI space, communities in conversation that include transdisciplinary boundary talk should continue en route ... as the journey continues to unfold.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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