

What to Teach and How to Teach It

in the Tonga English Literacy Project

A Peace Corps/Tonga Technical Note

July 8, 2017

Our English Literacy Project

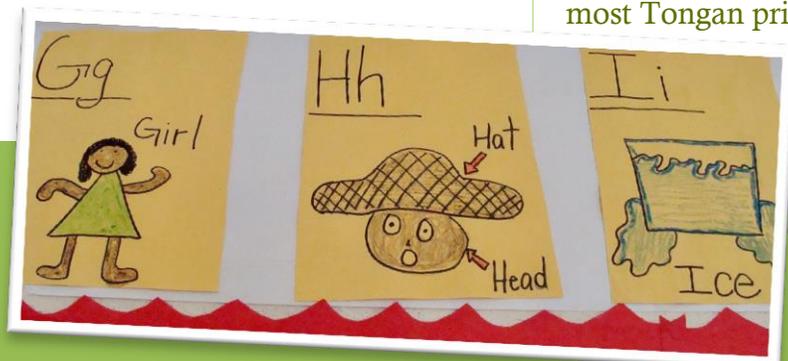
Since late 2012, Peace Corps/Tonga's English Literacy Project has worked with the Ministry of Education and Training and other partners to help Tongan schools and communities to use an innovative "student-centered" approach to language and literacy education.

This is one of a series of Technical Notes that describe practices developed in this project. It relates in particular to Project Goal 2 ("Improve teachers' skills" by increasing their use of student-centered methods and materials.)

Part 1: Why this Technical Note Was Written

When we began our English Literacy Project in late 2012, our small band of Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) was venturing into the unknown. We knew that the 15 PCVs (one-third trained teachers and two-thirds "generalists") were supposed to be helping the Ministry of Education and Training (MET, at the national level) and principals and teachers (at the government primary-school level) to develop and disseminate the new "child-centered" approach to instruction outlined in the national English syllabus. But our Volunteers had only a partial grasp of what exactly they should be teaching and the instructional practices they should be using.

Within the first year of the project (2013), Volunteers were finding that the official curriculum was at too high a level for most Tongan primary school students. These children tended to



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come to school with low English fluency and from environments where little English was spoken and where kids received little practical support for learning English. The curriculum was also not organized in ways that were easy for most Volunteers – and their Tongan counterparts -- to use, as it was short on simple, clear, engaging activities.

Nonetheless, the Volunteers forged ahead in that first year, adapting instructional practices they brought with them from the U.S., learned in Pre-Service Training and through trial and error in the classroom, and shared among themselves at In-Service Trainings and through informal peer sharing activities. The result was a somewhat random mix of skills being taught and instructional activities being used. By the second year of the project, Volunteers – with input from our Tongan partners -- began to identify priority areas to focus instruction on and compile a collection of easy-to-use

teaching activities. The PCVs assembled these tools into lesson plans and teaching materials that they shared digitally on an on-line file-sharing system and later on flash drives that they circulated among themselves and with counterparts.

By 2016, with concurrence of members of our Project Advisory Committee and other collaborators, the Volunteers had agreed to focus on:

- Three areas of English literacy skills: decoding, reading comprehension, and grammar;
- How those three areas were dealt with in the Units of the Class 4, 5, and 6 English curriculum;
- Engaging, participatory, “student-centered” instructional activities in which students were encouraged and helped to be active thinkers and builders of skills and knowledge;

- Additional learning objectives/content such as:
 - test-taking skills and study skills (especially as they related to the Class 6 Exam);
 - transferable learning skills such as curiosity, risk taking, problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership;
 - the literacy skills and background knowledge required for success in academic subjects and life tasks they will face in the future.

In 2017, a team of Volunteers (called the “Inclusive Education Group”) began to compile an English Literacy Activity Book that presented the above kinds of content and activities for each of the units in the MET English curriculum. Other PCV Committees/Groups compiled assessments (through the Monitoring and Evaluation Committee), reading materials (e.g., via the Sight Word Book Committee), a “Sai Ke Tau Ilo”



(“Good to Know”) Grammar Book (via the Monitoring and Evaluation Committee), an English Resource Book for Secondary Schools (by a group of PCVs working in secondary schools), and digital resources (through the Technology Group).

These resources -- if not always perfectly coordinated—were a major step toward creating an effective resource collection for English literacy educators in Tonga.

We should feel proud of the good work that our Volunteers, staff, and partners have generated in these five years.

That said, more work -- by us and our partners -- is needed to refine and coordinate these efforts.

This Technical Note is designed to:

- Document more specifically what we have learned so far about “what to teach and how to teach it” as it relates to the Tongan English curriculum.
- Present what we’ve learned in a way that PCVs and our partners can understand it, use it, and continue to build effective instructional and assessment resources.
- Help our Tongan partners to use these resources to make lasting improvements in the system of English literacy education in Tonga.



Part 2: What to Teach

Priority Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes to Focus on in English Literacy Education

Basic (“fundamental”) literacy skills (as found in MET English curriculum units for primary and middle schools)

Part 2 summarizes the basic English literacy skills and other related “KSAs” (types of knowledge, skills, and attitudes) that our PCVs are currently helping children develop through our English Literacy Project. This list will likely continue to evolve as we learn more through experience, input from our partners, infusion of new ideas from new PCVs, and research we become aware of from inside and outside Tonga.

In its “Building Blocks of Literacy” guide for PCV teachers of English, Peace Corps headquarters has developed the following “skill wheel” that shows the components of basic literacy that PCVs might focus on:



In Tonga, our Volunteers are adapting elements of that “skill wheel,” mixing them with input they have received from our Tongan partners and with what our PCVs have learned in five years in Tongan schools. The following list summarizes the key areas of basic literacy skills that our PCVs are currently focusing on:

- **Print awareness and knowledge:** PCVs are exposing children to many forms of printed English, especially books, and helping them to understand how printed English is used, how to handle print materials (e.g., in “library etiquette” sessions where students learn how to handle and store books, reading activities, creating of their own mini-books . . .). This is especially important for children who have very little exposure – in school or at home – to print materials in English or possibly in Tongan.
- **Decoding:** This includes alphabet knowledge (learning the names and shapes of the letters of the English alphabet, learning the sounds that the letters make, and sounding out of simple words).



- Reading comprehension and fluency: PCVs are using simple reading materials (especially the series of simple “Sight Word Books” created by Volunteers and Tongan partners) to help students become comfortable using simple written text to create and convey meaning. Through repeated practice (asking questions, challenging students to interpret, guess, speak what is found in simple stories), students gradually gain confidence and fluency in tackling the printed forms of English.

- Grammar: PCVs are helping students to understand and use basic English grammar which can be defined as “*the body of rules that describe the structure of expressions in the English language, including words, phrases, clauses, and sentences.*” More specifically, students are helped to learn:

- parts of speech: verbs, nouns, pronouns, prepositions, articles, conjunctions, adjectives, adverbs, modals . . .
- syntax: how those parts of speech are assembled in proper word order in phrases and sentences.

The Volunteers generally try to teach these skills as they are found in the various units of the Ministry’s English curriculum, to ensure that what the Volunteers teach is seen as relevant by the principals and teachers in their schools.

Other knowledge, skills, and attitudes students need for academic and real-world success

In addition to the above basic literacy skills, our Volunteers are, to varying degrees and in various ways, also teaching the following areas of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that children will need to succeed in both other academic subjects and in life roles they will be taking on as they get older:





- Test-taking skills and study skills (especially as they relate to the Class 6 Exam): Tongan primary school students face a major hurdle – the feared “Class 6 Exam” – that they must overcome if they wish to be admitted to, at a minimum, middle school and, preferably, a well-respected middle school.

Students in Class 5 and Class 6 spend a lot of time preparing for that exam, through special test-prep sessions during regular school hours and in extra-curricular sessions.

The actual exam is, in the view of many PCVs and others, not well designed, in that it doesn't test for relevant skills needed for success in secondary school, is set at too high a level (in terms of the literacy skills and background knowledge tested for), is not well organized and presented (with overly-complicated wording), and contains errors (in spelling, vocabulary, and grammar).

Nonetheless, students are expected to succeed on the test and much effort goes into test-prep activities that may or may not focus on relevant content (e.g., strategies to know what kinds of questions will likely be found on the test and how to tackle those questions in a timely way).

It is also not clear that test-prep sessions use effective instructional strategies (e.g., exposing students to the types of questions they will likely face on the test, helping students understand why they get the wrong answer and ways to get the correct answer, and building confidence and positive motivation going into the test).

In addition to test-prep skills, Tongan students need “study skills” not just to prepare for the Class 6 exam but more generally to succeed academically and to conduct will face as they enter adulthood. In practical terms, Tongan students are typically pushed to be passive recipients and repeaters of information provided by others (e.g., by memorizing and regurgitating facts and sounds).

Less emphasis has historically been placed on helping students to become active thinkers who figure out things they need and want to know and ways to develop that knowledge (through reading, asking questions, trial and error, observation, etc.)



- Transferable learning skills such as curiosity, risk taking, problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership: These transferable skills are not always explicitly identified as being part of the formal Tongan curriculum but are nonetheless often implicitly valued and reinforced both in Tonga and most other societies. Sometimes referred to as “soft” skills, these might be broken into the following inter-related sub-categories:

- “the affective (emotional) domain” (e.g., “self-efficacy” [the belief that making an effort to take on a learning task will likely produce something positive for the learner]);
- “classroom etiquette” (e.g., the social skills to work with others to carry out learning tasks);
- “cognitive skills” (e.g., the ability to be creative and identify meaningful learning objectives, find information, organize it, analyze it, solve problems with it); and
- “moral character” (e.g., performing learning tasks with respect, honesty, perseverance, fairness, generosity).

- Particular literacy skills and background knowledge required for success in academic subjects and life tasks they will face in the future: The above kinds of literacy and other skills are required for success in most if not all other academic areas. For example, students need these skills to study science, history, geography, culture, and applied mathematics. In turn, students will need practical literacy, test-taking, study, and other transferable skills to successfully perform family, work, and civic roles as they get older.

Rather than see literacy and the other kinds of skills as something “separate” from other academic and “real-world” responsibilities, students and educators should recognize that they are interwoven with each other and structure learning activities accordingly (as described under “How to Teach,” below.)



Part 3: How to Teach Effective Ways to Help Tongan Students to Develop English Literacy

How do key partners and stakeholders define a “student-centered approach” to English literacy education?

Part 3 summarizes:

- *How key partners in our English Literacy Project define a “child-” or “student-centered approach to literacy education.*
- *Student-centered practices our PCVs, staff, and partners have developed.*

Guidelines suggested by the Tongan Ministry of Education and Training (MET)

MET defines its child-centered (which Peace Corps refers to as “student-centered”) approach as one which:

- provides guidance, encouragement, and opportunities for learners to actively develop new English-related knowledge and skills.
- recognizes that learners learn in different ways and at different rates. (Therefore instructors should use “differentiated instruction” to customize activities to each students’ strengths, needs . . .)
- uses instructional activities which help students to *actively* engage in mastering skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and related sub-skills (vocabulary, letter and word recognition, phonics, spelling, grammar . . .) through application to (practice with) common uses (“themes”) of English literacy.
- uses ongoing assessment to assess students’ needs and monitor and guide student progress.

Guidelines suggested by Peace Corps headquarters

The literacy/TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) staff at PC HQ advocate for an instructional approach which:

- focuses instruction systematically on helping students master components (building blocks) of literacy.
- exposes students to activities in which they become familiar and comfortable with how English is used naturally, as a tool for meaningful communication.
- takes a bi-literacy approach (blending teaching of English literacy and mother tongue literacy).
- builds support for literacy in schools but also in homes and communities.
- adapts the activities in the PC Building Blocks of Literacy manual to the PCV’s particular school context.

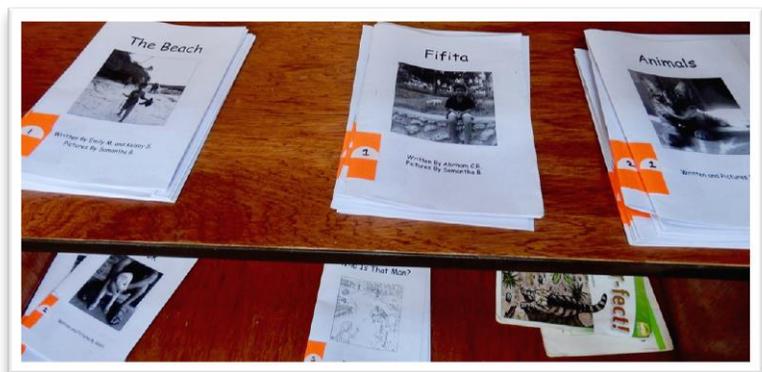
What kinds of “student-centered practices have stakeholders identified?

Practices suggested by the Tongan Ministry of Education and Training

- Introduce bite-size new vocabulary and concepts.
- Give multiple opportunities to practice individually, in small groups, and in whole group.
- Link language learning to real life tasks/applications.
- Precede written activities with speaking activities.
- Encourage students to brainstorm ideas and vocabulary (in response to open-ended questions).
- Have students work in pairs and small groups to share ideas, model for each other, give feedback to peers, provide opportunities to use English to communicate.
- Use role plays to allow for modeling and practice in use of English communication skills.
- Use songs, games, flashcards, realia (real objects) related to relevant themes.
- Provide templates (e.g., sample letters, Cloze activities) which allow students to “fill in the blanks” and understand various ways oral and written English is used.
- Use shared reading activities.

Practices suggested by Peace Corps headquarters

- Use routines and structures (e.g., book routines) to help students engage with learning activities efficiently.
- Continually assess (through observation, “tests,” etc.) student progress, needs, strengths, and interests, and use that information to guide your activities.
- Help counterparts build their capacity (through co-teaching, co-planning . . .)
- Be creative, flexible, and well prepared.
- Make reading materials accessible and read them multiple times.
- Use visual aids (e.g., pictures, charts, symbols, signs . . .)



Practices suggested by PC/Tonga Volunteers, staff, and partners

In the first year of our English Literacy Project, our Volunteers and staff learned that, while the MET English syllabus does say in broad terms that Tongan teachers should use various kinds of child-(student-) centered activities, it does not go into much detail about what those activities would look like or where they should be fit into the curriculum units.

Our Volunteers and staff have filled in this gap by creating an innovative mix of activities. Examples of the guidelines they follow and practices they've developed are presented below:



Guideline #1: Use practices that respond to various student learning styles and strengths, including:

Practice #1:

Educational games which can emphasize both competition and cooperation as well as individual work and teamwork. Educational games can use creative, challenging tasks to help learners:

- develop/practice relevant skills (both literacy/language skills and others such as teamwork, creativity, problem-solving . . .) through application to a task;
- be motivated (energized physically and socially) to see learning as rewarding and something they enjoy.

Games can also include such elements as:

- mental challenge;
- competition;
- physical activity (e.g., sport...);
- a performing art or visual art.

Examples of games include:

- card games like “Go Fish,” “Concentration,” “Uno”-type games;
- games involving physical movement like “slap” (run and touch) games, Simon Says;
- crossword puzzles;
- “matching” games (e.g., matching a picture to a written word);
- Hangman;
- Bingo;
- Charades;
- Tic Tac Know.

Guideline #1: Use practices that respond to various student learning styles and strengths (cont'd.):

Practice #2: Performing arts which can:

- provide additional opportunities for learners to practice and reinforce particular communication skills (e.g., vocabulary, listening, pronunciation, speaking), creativity, collaboration skills, and content knowledge (about various academic and “real-world” topics . . .)
- respond to various kinds of learning styles (visual, auditory, verbal, kinesthetic, logical/mathematical, social, solitary . . .)
- motivate students to see learning as fun (e.g., positive, social, stimulating) and something they can use outside the classroom.
- stimulate learners (wake them up, physically and mentally).
- build on students’ prior knowledge (e.g., singing) and help them relate to the new learning activity.

Examples of uses of performing arts include:

- music (songs, instrumental music, jazz chants . . .)
- movement (e.g., dance, mime, TPR)
- acting (role playing . . .)
- public speaking (debates . . .)
- juggling, acrobatics, cheerleading . . .

Practice #3: Physical movement which can:

- provide the same kinds of benefits as those described for performing arts, above.
- include:
 - aerobics,
 - stretching,
 - sports,
 - walking/hiking/exploring,
 - “clean-up” activities (e.g., pick up rubbish in the school yard.

Practice #4: Visual arts which have many of the potential benefits of using performing arts, as described above.

Examples of uses of visual arts include:

- drawing/painting (cartoons, stick men, greeting cards, posters . . .)
- graphic presentations (maps, charts, calendars)
- clothing/costumes . . .)
- calligraphy, handwriting, hand-lettering
- sculpting, origami . . .
- photography (individual photos, slide shows . . .)
- video presentations
- collages (of photos, clippings, or objects representing a theme...)
- computer presentations (clip art, PowerPoints)
- decorating
- handicrafts (weaving, carving, flower arranging . . .)

Practice #5: Use of technology which have many of the potential benefits of using performing arts and visual arts, plus helping students to develop technology-related skills.

Examples of uses of technology include:

- viewing and discussing videos (and creating their own (using increasingly-available video technologies);
- listening to recorded music (and making their own recordings);
- word processing (to write stories, poems, and songs; to fill in forms, tables, and other commonly-used literacy formats);
- using email to communicate with other audiences;
- use of educational software.



Guideline #1: Use practices that respond to various student learning styles and strengths (cont'd.):

Practice #6: Reading activities which can:

- provide additional opportunities for learners to practice and reinforce particular literacy and communication skills (e.g., print awareness, vocabulary, listening, pronunciation, speaking), creativity, collaboration skills, and content knowledge (about various academic and “real-world” topics . . .)
- respond to various kinds of learning styles (visual, auditory, verbal, kinesthetic, logical/mathematical, social, solitary . . .)
- motivate students to see reading as fun (e.g., positive, social, stimulating) and something they can use outside the classroom.
- stimulate learners (wake them up, physically and mentally).
- build on students’ prior knowledge (e.g., singing) and help them relate to the new learning activity.

Examples of reading activities include:

- guided reading in which a facilitator leads students through the reading of a common text, using a familiar series of steps which engage the student in actively thinking, talking, asking, and sharing about various features of the text.
- sustained silent reading in which students read silently for an extended period, to help them focus on engaging with a text without distraction.
- choral reading (reading aloud as a group).
- reading about a particular topic they are interested in and possibly using what they learned as part of a project in which they share what they’ve learned. Such reading activities could also be paired with the watching of a related video, listening to an audio recording, a visit to a related site, listening to a presentation by a subject-matter expert, and/or interviewing a subject matter expert.

Practice #7: Writing activities which can have many of the potential benefits of reading activities, as described above, plus helping learners to develop understanding of and comfort with the various forms and uses of writing, including:

- using writing to develop relationships and communicate with others,
- writing skills needed for academic and real-world uses.

Examples of uses of writing activities include:

- writing of narrative texts (e.g., stories, reports, biographical information . . .);
- writing of poetry and songs;
- writing of graphic forms of literacy (e.g., lists, tables, charts, forms . . .);
- using writing as part of a learning project in which students collect information, record it, and present their findings in print and/or orally;
- copying of text written by others to practice the mechanics of handwriting, while . . .
 - becoming familiar with how a foreign language looks, sounds, and is presented;
 - learning the vocabulary and spelling of a language.



Guideline #1: Use practices that respond to various student learning styles and strengths (cont'd.):

Practice #8: Worksheets which can provide a structure within which students can carry out various tasks to further develop literacy and other types of skills and knowledge.

Examples of worksheets include:

- Checklists;
- Matching games;
- Puzzles (e.g., crossword . . .)
- Cloze activities (in which learners fill in blanks in a narrative passage);
- Sample forms to be filled in;
- Reading passages followed by questions to be answered.

Practice #9: Portfolios as a way to collect, reflect on, learn from, and improve on student work. Teachers can create a portfolio system in which students regularly collect samples of their work and pass them onto their teacher(s) for feedback. Ongoing collecting and reflecting on work by students and teachers can be a way for them to reflect on and communicate about student progress, challenges to be dealt with, and areas to focus on. Students can become thoughtful learners and users of literacy in the process. The collected work can also be shown to various audiences (e.g., parents, school administrators) as evidence of student success and the school's impact.

Guideline #2: Use a range of material resources, including . . .

- books from school library (e.g., simple reading materials, Reading Box Blue, . . .);
- realia (i.e., real-life objects and text found in the community);
- items made by teachers, PCVs, students, and possibly parents (games, charts, worksheets, white boards. . .);
- items provided to PCVs in electronic and hard copy formats.

Guideline #3: Use all four “language arts” (listening, speaking, reading, writing).

This is done in recognition that these are all required for a person to be literate in a language and can and should be taught in an integrated, coordinated way so that they reinforce each other.

Guideline #4: Have students working as individuals and in various kinds of groups.

Students can be organized in small groups consisting of either:

- Students of the same skill level in the same group;
- Students of mixed skill levels in the same group.

Since our English Literacy Project began in late 2012, our PCVs and staff have been compiling lesson plans and teaching materials that use the above “student-centered” approach to help learners develop the previously-described range of skills within the framework of MET’s English literacy curriculum. Readers are encouraged to review this collection, to better understand what this looks like in a Tongan context. These resources can be found in:

- *PCV-made resources, including the English Literacy Activity Book, “Sai Ke Tau Ilo” (Good to Know) Grammar Book, assessment tools, and Sight Word Books;*
- *Flashdrives given to PCVs; and*
- *the LAVA Kits (e.g., plastic bins containing print resources) given to Volunteers by staff.*



Part 4: How PCVs Can Decide What to Teach and Activities to Use

There are thus many things (e.g., literacy skills, content from other curriculum areas and life contexts, test-taking skills, study skills, positive behaviors and attitudes) that a PCV could focus on. How can a PCV figure out where to focus her/his work? Here are some suggestions, drawing on the experience of our PCVs to date:

To clarify what to focus on and activities to use, a PCV should work with counterparts to . . .

- Do an initial, broad assessment of student and school interests, strengths, and needs when the PCV first arrives at site. Each newly-arrived PCV will be given a “Resource Inventory” to complete in the first few months at site, using interviews, observations, assessments, and other ways to clarify what the school needs, resources available, and appropriate roles the Volunteer might play.
- Do ongoing informal observations and communications with students, parents, and others during Summer Break. This might include doing informal tutoring, English movie-watching, games (possibly organized in a Summer English Club or similar activity) with children in the PCV’s neighborhood or village).
- Take time during the Summer Break and beyond to read through the resources provided to PCVs in electronic and print formats.
- Participate in teacher planning meetings prior to the start of the school year and throughout the year.
- Use the first school term (February – April) to try out various activities, get to know students and counterparts, and clarify how to use the PCV’s strengths to help the school respond to its needs.
- Do more-detailed assessments (at regular intervals) of specifics of:
 - student abilities (through various kinds of assessments, including written and oral tests, observation, review of written work, interviews, field-testing of instructional activities, class discussions . . .)
 - teachers’ and principals’ perspectives about student needs and how PCVs can help.
 - parents’ perspectives about their children’s needs, how literacy is (or isn’t) supported at home, to clarify how the PCV might fill gaps.

Part 5: What This Means for New PCVs

- Every PCV's experience will be different because:
 - Schools will need different things (e.g., particular topics teachers and students need help with . . .)
 - PCVs and counterparts have various strengths and interests related to teaching and literacy.
- PCVs will have to decide (on their own, with fellow Volunteers and staff, and with counterparts) which content and activities to use (to respond to the needs of their schools and students and to fit with their own strengths).
- PCVs need to patiently adapt their expertise to Tongan realities, regardless of their previous experience.
- Pre-Service Training and subsequent training and other supports (e.g., peer supports provided by fellow PCVs) are designed to help PCVs develop their expertise in these areas.
- This work is important. Tonga's English Literacy Project is contributing to both a national and a worldwide effort to provide new kinds of high-quality basic education for children. Children are key to the future of Tonga and of our world. Our PCVs can all contribute to this collective effort and make a difference.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Read . . .

- Curriculum Development Unit (November 2011). English Language Syllabus for Basic Education in Tongan Schools (Class 3 – Class 8). Ministry of Education and Training: Nuku'alofa, Tonga.
- Office of Overseas Programming and Training Support (May 2015). The Building Blocks of Literacy: A Literacy Resource Manual for Peace Corps Volunteers. Peace Corps: Washington, D.C.
- Office of Overseas Programming and Training Support (February, 2017 draft). Education Sector Strategy. Peace Corps: Washington, D.C.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This Technical Note draws on the tremendous work of five Groups of Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs), Peace Corps staff, and our partners in Tonga in 2012-2017, as well as other initiatives in education and development in the U.S. and other countries.

The author thanks his Tongan colleagues and other innovative educators for the constructive thinking and positive spirit they have brought to these important efforts. (Special thanks to Siaosi 'Enosi Tu'ipulotu for his insightful comments on this text.)

In mid-2017, Director of Programming and Training, Paul Jurmo, Ed.D., wrote this as a resource for new and current PCVs, staff members, and interested community and national partners in Tonga. Others with an interest in literacy education and development in other countries are encouraged to consider how these ideas might be adapted in other national contexts, as well.

Malo ngaue and ofa atu and from Tonga!

