Preamble
In the late 1980s and into the mid 1990s there was an upsurge of interest in what came to be known as the Whole Language theory of language teaching and learning. This theory is based on naturalistic and holistic beliefs, rooted in the idea that learning is social, cooperative, supportive, interactive and reflective. Learning allows the learner, whether it is a teacher, a student in the classroom, a student teacher, a head teacher or principal, or a curriculum writer and/or developer, to learn through and with a group or community of learners.

Here at the University of the South Pacific (USP), the re-thinking was welcomed by literacy educators, as there had been growing concern about the number of non-readers and writers in the primary school system and the level of English of the undergraduate students of USP. Why do we have non-readers and writers and passive readers and writers? The answer may have something to do with the strategies of learning that are utilised in many Pacific classrooms.

Communal learning
Learning and working in a community of learners comes naturally to Pacific Island people as members of communal societies. Tasks that are carried out in the villages, such as weddings, funerals, fishing, boat or canoe building, weaving, sculpturing and carving are done with lots of support from the members of the group, and with lots of interaction, cooperation and reflection. This also includes the tasks of rearing and nurturing within families – the nuclear and extended families. Thus, in Pacific communities, there are naturalistic, holistic ways of learning; learning is shared and guided, and there is time for practice which, with a community of workers in a non-threatening learning environment, is bound to yield quality outcomes.

Over the years, the outcome of the re-assessment and re-thinking work of the Primary Reading Project (PRP) of the Institute of Education (IOE) at the University of the South Pacific (USP) is the promotion and fostering of the following basic tenets of living in Pacific communities.

* Pacific people are communal people.
* They work best when they do things together in an atmosphere that is non-threatening.
* Risk taking is recognised as a natural process.
* They are guided and led by their communal leaders who they respect.
* They learn to do things with lots of practice.
* Skill development is fundamental.
* They are great story-tellers, dancers, singers and performers.
* Sharing, catering for others, readily offering assistance whenever and wherever needed, sharing to learn and learning to share are the hallmarks of living in these communal societies.

Implications for literacy teaching
Matching the above basic tenets of living with relevant literacy pedagogy gives us some broad guidelines, listed below.

* Co-operative, holistic, naturalistic strategies are embraced.
* Group work is used.
* Risk-taking is encouraged.
* Literacy skill development ought to be the fundamental objective of every literacy and learning encounter.
* Students should be listening to a lot of stories told, read and they should be allowed to dramatise and role play the stories and compose songs.
Learning must follow the normal process: it is shared, practised, with all attempts praised and more effort encouraged and facilitated with lots of guidance by the teacher.

Other issues that emerged from the re-assessment and re-thinking work of the IOE/PRP are:

* recognition of the home as the first institution of learning,
* the realisation that teachers are agents of change,
* the need to develop children’s books that reflect the lives and experiences of Pacific island children, peoples and cultures,
* the need for an evaluation and assessment technique that is user-friendly,
* the need for parents’ education on parental involvement in their children’s education,
* the need for good, supportive leadership and management,
* the need for a well-resourced classroom.

**Shared reading**
The concepts of sharing and support are the keys to working together in village communities of the Pacific. Therefore, to learn to read, the learner needs to share the process of reading with an expert who supports the learning process with the learner. We cannot learn to read by beginning with the parts—the letters, sounds, words—or worse still by being drilled to learn these. These do not mean anything for the beginning reader, particularly one who is from an oral background. Such teaching can only cause confusion and frustration at the outset because it is alienating and can frighten the learner.

One learns to read by seeing and listening to someone work on the process—that is actually reading. For beginning readers or for struggling readers, the material used should be in the form of a big book so that the children can see the words as the teacher points to them while s/he reads and they can also see how reading is carried out (the conventions of reading): left to right, stopping at full stops, and so forth.

Because one is learning, one needs to be hooked onto the process so the teacher needs to choose the reading material carefully. It must be interesting, be at his/her level and arouse some enthusiasm in the learner. “Can you read that again teacher?” is an indication of interest and enthusiasm and can also generate lots of discussion and reflection after the reading. The more the learners listen to interesting, thought-provoking stories, the more they get hooked on books and reading.

**Guided reading**
The teacher’s core job is to facilitate the learning. Guiding the reading is one way of doing this. This is a one-to-one strategy used for beginning readers, struggling readers, or when working with a group of learners. The idea is to support the child’s learning or reading. It must be done with a lot of respect for what the child already knows and building on that knowledge, not coercing the child to read through repetition and drilling. These are too cumbersome and frightening for the learner. Guiding a child involves allowing her to read the story at her own pace, giving her time to try out how to say a word, and encouraging her with praise. The learner is a human being who can be put off by uncaring comments. Support and encouragement are the key roles of teachers and in the process children take initiative in their learning; they develop a better relationship with the teacher and with others if they are working in their groups, and they also enhance their social skills. Learning in these sessions must be non-threatening and non-condescending.

**Independent reading: reflective and critical learning**
When children become fluent readers in their classes, it means the skills are developed and they will need more books and more time for
independent reading and writing activities to allow their creative talents to develop.

**After-reading activities**

Some exciting and creative after-reading activities are listed below. They develop meaning and arouse interest and enthusiasm in learners. With these types of creative learning activities, learners learn more deeply, retain ideas longer and are better able to develop life-long learning skills. They become highly motivated and enjoy learning to read and write more. Teachers need to select appropriate activities and give guidance according to the level of literacy competence and age of the learner.

* talk about the story and give their opinions of the story, characters and events
* role-play or dramatise the story
* try ‘reading’ the story using the smaller version of the book (after shared reading)
* draw their favourite character or event
* make up songs/plays/poems/dances/murals from the story
* write a sequel/letter/news item/notice/advertisement from the story
* do library/Internet research on some information from the story.

**Language learning**

Learning to read also involves learning the language of the story. When the children have enjoyed the after-reading activities above and after interest and enthusiasm are aroused, they will be ready to look closely at the language of the story:

* the letters that make up a word (spelling).
* the sounds that make up the letters (phonics)
* the words of the story (vocabulary) and how these are used to make the story sound interesting and meaningful
* the punctuation marks—the various ones used and why
* answering questions—filling in the blanks, choosing correct answers and working on multiple choice questions.

These language exercises are also learned through games: flash card games, snap games, snakes and ladders games, stepping stone games, crossword puzzles, finding the word in a maze and so on. When one enjoys an activity and when these are done in a community of learners, the learning is retained.

**Conclusion**

Naturalistic, holistic literacy and language development methods have proved successful in Pacific classrooms and have resulted in changes to literacy and language curricula across the region. It is critical to allow for this proven development to be sustained through more training, technical advice and action research in classrooms. The proven development has motivated learners to learn, to take initiative, to be divergent thinkers, to be reflective learners, to be critical learners and to be more insightful and better able to think for themselves.

Drilling and rote learning still exist and have prevailed for too long. The consequences are felt in schools, in higher institutions in workplaces and in communities. However, curriculum developers and teacher educators are adamant that the approach to teaching literacy must change. It is a critical role of concerned literacy educators and leaders in education to allow Pacific values, knowledge and beliefs to permeate every aspect of literacy education—curriculum, pedagogy and practices of the Pacific Island countries—for quality, relevance and meaningful outcomes.