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# Reading, Writing and Resources: The Conditions of Creativity

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## Reading, Writing and Resources:

### The Conditions of Creativity

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S.I.T. Samoa, Spring 2013



## Abstract

This paper addresses the question of whether young Samoans are adequately encouraged to pursue creative fields, specifically writing. It examines relevant literature on the role of libraries and catalysts for early-learning reading as well as the benefits of creative writing, uses interviews with professors, editors, authors and librarians in surveying the current state of creative writing among young Samoans and how the roles of the culture, resources and the curriculums impact this, utilizes surveys to gauge student interest in writing, and finally culminates in a creative writing workshop held to expose university students to writing. The findings point to a lack of emphasis on creative outlets for young Samoans, arising from cultural as well as resource issues, but also finds that students want more writing in their education and initiatives are in place to support further growth in the field. Samoa has much room to grow, but the emphasis on reading and writing is improving through the combined efforts of the government and passionate individuals, so young Samoan writers are exposed to new opportunities every day.

I dedicate this study to my parents, who nodded their heads approvingly when I told them that I'd spend a semester in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, the same way they've nodded approvingly at all that I've chosen in life when others might not have understood. I'm blessed to have lucked out with the cool 'aiga. Alofa ia te outou.

## Acknowledgements

A special thanks to my advisor, Marj Moore, whose involvement in the creative writing contests at the *Samoa Observer* first piqued my interest in the topic as well as creatively opening doors for so many young Samoans, to Will Marquess and Liz Einness-Brown, who eased my nerves and shaped my study from oceans away, to Angela Jowitt, who expanded my topic immensely and colored ideas that I hadn't even know I'd had, and to Emma Kruse Va'ai, whose theories, words and life path served to inspire me immensely. Thank you to everyone who took time out of their busy schedules to speak with me, and thank you to everyone working towards developing and nurturing more young Samoan readers and writers—your dedication is moving. A final thank you to Amy Strawbridge for being a passionate creative writing co-host and to the students brave enough to bare their souls to the overenthusiastic palagi imploring them to dance—may you always find clarity, identify, meaning and peace through your writing. Fa'afetai tele lava!

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## Introduction

This study explores the role of the young writer in Samoa. When studying writers, readers must be taken into account as well, as reading is the first interaction that students have with written language. Through exploring the cultural and resource issues that fail to encourage widespread reading, specifically in the role of libraries and the lack of children's pleasure books and elementary graded readers written in Samoan, the study hopes to illuminate the introduction that many young Samoans have to writing. The study also examines the cultural role of creative writing in Samoa, examining how a communal society navigates the individual act of writing, and how the curriculum in Samoan schools reflects this. Surveys were used to gather students' opinions on writing and their access to it, and the benefits of writing, both for the individual and society, are explored as well as initiatives in place to encourage continued growth in the field. Finally, creative writing workshops were held at the University of the South Pacific (USP) Alafua campus and at the National University of Samoa (NUS) to expose students to creative writing.

## Methodology

When I initially began this project, I had hoped to teach creative writing workshops in primary or secondary schools. Due to both language restraints of students and time restraints on my end, I had to repurpose my study—instead of focusing locally on exposing a few students to creative writing, I wanted to get a broader picture of the role of creative writing for all young Samoans, taking into account every factor that shaped current realities.

I began my research with a logical jumping-off point, exploring the recent advent of writing contests run by the *Samoa Observer*. The responses of the contest creators were surprising in their depth and breadth—the contests were not simply to encourage creativity and fill space in the newspaper, they developed out of frustrations in the lack of emphasis on reading, writing and independent or creative thought in the curriculum, from the lack of Samoan writers and the non-presence of Samoan art on a global scale, from the determination to get children involved and recognize that their voices were significant through seeing their work published, fostering pride and validating their voices. Lofty goals, to be sure, but the contest produced students who were proud of their work, who pledged to write more and represent Samoa and its people in this way. In talking with the contest developers, asking what they suggested the first move needs to be in encouraging more young writers, the response was unanimous—“Read, read, read, read, read!” (Malifa 25 April 2013).

The role of reading is monumental in developing and encouraging writing skills in children, so I followed the contest developers’ advice and examined this, not expecting to find such a palimpsest of layers to the situation. I found that the reality of donations, the expense of shipping and customs costs, the state of libraries, a lack of trained librarians, the misallocation of resources, and the difficulties and expense in large-scale publication versus the small-scale benefits of local printing all contribute to the current state of reading among



young Samoans, and this is without considering the cultural influences that color and shape literary attitudes.

As reading so obviously filters into writing, my next research step was to examine how the culture supports or discourages creative outlets among its young people, a complicated situation considering the opposite forces of the fa'asamoa's emphasis on storytelling and its discouragement of young people speaking out of turn, the reality of individual thought often being looked down upon—a complex situation to navigate and one that required conversations with many intelligent and engaged experts. At this point, I wondered if what I was doing was even worthwhile—did young people want to see more creative writing? This is when I developed the surveys, which were filled out by NUS and USP students, and I found an overwhelmingly positive response (see Appendix A). My research concluded with studying the benefits of creative writing on both the individual and societal levels, speaking to authors and engaging academic articles, and finally I co-hosted creative writing workshops for university students at both the National University of Samoa and the University of the South Pacific alongside my classmate Amy Strawbridge, finding my research coming full circle from my initial objectives.

### Flipping the Page: Reading in Samoa

It is impossible to study the influence of writing without looking at the role of reading—as the first interaction that students have with written language, reading is monumental in forming the lifelong relationship that young Samoans will have with writing. Developing a love of reading from a young age is something that most writers cite as the main reason that they chose their career paths. The founder of the *Samoa Observer* states aspiring writers must “become intoxicated with reading—reading is so important,” (Malifa 25 April 2013). As a developing nation, Samoa still has much to improve in terms of

encouraging students to read and making resources available to them, and in order to understand the way that reading plays into young Samoans' lives, it is necessary to examine both the cultural and resource issues that complicate this relationship.

The main issue lies in a lack of resources, something that “can be seen everywhere and effects everyone,” (Heem 1 May 2013), most notably schools. But a popular line of thinking insinuates that more significant than a lack of resources is a misallocation of the resources available due to a prioritization of things like the church over education, which Dr. Melesisea spoke to in his interview. He passionately pointed out,

School buildings which should be given priority are run-down, and in the same way the educational system is run-down... If we could utilize the resources that we DO have better—have you noticed that not a single church is run-down in any village? The school is very low on the priority list. (Melesisea 1 May 2013).

Dr. Melesisea further pointed to the fact that both the Australian and New Zealand governments subsidize the education of every primary student generously, and asked where this money was going if not directly to the resources provided to students.

One way that inadequate resources can be seen is through the libraries in Samoa. According to Angela Jowitt, the former vice president of the Library Association of Samoa, there are too few libraries, trained librarians, and books. These all come back to the prohibiting factor of cost—to train and hire skilled librarians costs money. The Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESC) is now asking librarians to manage entire districts rather than single libraries as a result of this cost, which Jowitt points to as an additional problem rather than a solution, since libraries without a full-time staff librarian cannot be utilized by students or otherwise interested patrons. An additional issue with libraries is a misallocation of funds, as schools will sometimes have beautiful donated facilities for a library without any books, something that comes partially as a result of not enough trained

librarians to organize these libraries. Furthermore, many students simply do not know how to use a library, as widespread libraries are a recent and growing advent, “Many kids in this country haven’t grown up with the concept of a library—even by the time they’re in university, it’s still a bit foreign to them,” (Jowitt 2 May 2013), which causes misunderstandings sometimes resulting in book vandalism—having never been taught respect for shared materials and books, students will rip pages out rather than photocopying—or book theft resulting from students not fully understanding the borrowing system. Another consequence is that students sometimes underutilize the library—according to Josie Hunt of the Nelson Memorial Public Library in Apia, on average only two students visit the youth section of the library on any given day (Hunt 3 May 2013). She cited reasons not only related to students not understanding how to use the resources and facilities, but also the difficulty in parents bringing their children to the library.

The fact that Josie Hunt referenced parents as a leading reason for the small number of young patrons leads to another reason for underutilization—the fact that culture does not have a strong emphasis on reading, a mostly solitary activity in opposition to the communal nature of a Samoan society with an orally-rooted tradition. However, while on some level it remains foreign, reading is becoming more widely accepted and emphasized, as Angela stated, “Reading [for pleasure] isn’t something that Samoans have grown up with—we’re only starting that trend with this generation” (Jowitt 2 May 2013), pointing to a cultural shift taking place.

One of the greatest hindering factors in developing a strong basis of children that read for pleasure is the lack of books, especially relevant books. Even students who enjoy reading and actively seek out reading opportunities can have trouble finding them, as Jowitt reiterates, “There’s difficulty accessing books—the problem of getting enough to read,” (Jowitt 2 May 2013). The reasons for the situation are multifaceted, but cost is ultimately the

main prohibiting factor. Sourcing books in general is expensive with shipping costs and customs fees, something emphasized further by Samoa's status as a developing nation without an abundance of money to spend on such materials. But finding books written in Samoan is even more difficult, as many publishers are not willing to print Samoan books simply because the costs are too high. "It's incredibly difficult and expensive to get books published in Pacific languages," (Jowitt 2 May 2013). By nature of the publishing business, a publishing company needs to keep costs of the book reasonably low enough to sell to consumers, but with such a small audience, it's impossible to keep production costs low enough to meet that need. There is the alternate option of getting Samoan books printed by local printers, thus answering the call for more relevant Samoan literature and expediting shipping costs, but the production is still expensive and there is the added hassle of self-distribution. By nature of these factors, most of the books in Samoan libraries are in English and originate overseas, and due to the high costs of books in general, most of them are donated.

Donation of books further complicates the situation, since that means that libraries do not have much of a choice in the books that they shelve. As Angela put it plainly,

The books others are about to toss are the ones we end up with. They're either in poor shape or entirely irrelevant—once at the public library, one of the books that I saw on display was a how-to guide on knitting woollen jumpers. Who in their right mind would knit a jumper in Samoa? We need more relevant books. (Jowitt 2 May 2013).

Such irrelevant material decreases the allure of reading, as the average Samoan child cannot identify with a book dealing with woollen jumpers in the same way that they cannot fully identify with Dick and Jane—there is a need for books about Pacific islanders for Pacific islanders, a sentiment that Emma Kruse Va'ai echoes, "I can say that there is simply not enough Samoan written material and that needs to be changed," (Kruse Va'ai May 6 2013).

Even more important than simply not captivating children in the way that books more relevant to their lifestyles could, the overflow of Western books makes the process of learning to read more difficult for Samoan children. Rather than focusing on reading itself, the child is forced to struggle through external meanings, as Kruse Va'ai states,

There is a need for contextualized, graded elementary readers for students. When students are beginning to read, they should be focusing on the repetition of words, the connection between the word and the symbol and understanding that. But students here don't have the Samoan equivalents of Janet and John or Dick and Jane because of the time and money needed to print." (Kruse Va'ai May 6 2013).

The foreign concepts and unfamiliar landscapes present in Westernized material detract from the experience of learning to read, bogging down the process and giving an unfair disadvantage to Pacific students. They are forced to muddle through a more difficult process which necessitates that they decode alien concepts before they can focus on and actively participate with the process of reading. As Kruse Va'ai reiterated in our interview, "The necessity lies in contextualizing so that the child doesn't have to struggle through external meanings while learning to read—in due course, they can move to the external, but begin with the local," (Kruse Va'ai 6 May 2013), as familiar backgrounds make the process of learning easier and more comfortable for the child since meaning is so interrelated with context.

This is not to say that the process of producing Samoan texts for children has not been on the forefront—in fact, ever since the New Zealand administration of Samoa, it has been a government objective to provide Samoan texts to Samoan children. Furthermore, a way that Samoan people have combated the disadvantage of the presence of more English texts than Samoan is through "Samoanizing" Western texts and plays, adapting them to better suit local practices and values. Kruse Va'ai theorizes in her book that "Such use of English; a colonial language, to articulate Samoan cultural values and practices therefore counters notions of

linguistic exclusivity and ethnocentrism” (Kruse Va’ai 138), and while it is important to lend credit where credit is due, this in no way reduces the need for more relevant, localized and Samoa-centric texts for children, since the benefits of this do not simply lie in contextualized and easier learning.

The necessity of children seeing themselves and their ways of life reflected in the stories that they read is monumental in the validation of their lives as significant and important. Children need Samoan texts in order to battle an overwhelming Western influence, potential feelings of inferiority or a sense of being marginal in their own land threatening them from a young age with the “indirect impact of Western enculturation,” (Kruse Va’ai 133). Providing children with books that reflect the common themes of a Samoan lifestyle, such as Emma Kruse Va’ai’s children’s books, are a way of preserving the culture and maintaining pride and ownership, and further are a manner of “Chang[ing] the perception that literary culture and English [are] synonymous and that the local culture [is] unsuitable for English literature,” (Kruse Va’ai 134). By providing children with books by Samoan authors, writing is reinforced as a viable option for them and they are provided with much-needed authorial role models. The Samoan author Lani Wendt Young reasserted this need, “We don’t have many Samoan authors/writers to look to for role models. I grew up an avid reader and writer but I didn’t think being a REAL author was an option for me in the future because there were no young adult books by Samoan authors.” (Wendt Young 25 April 2013), an attitude that Emma Kruse Va’ai echoed to me in saying that children were often incredulous when she said she was a Samoan author, as there’s the idea that, “Writers come from the outside, [that] you’re not a writer if you’re a local,” (Kruse Va’ai 6 May 2013), underscoring the need for local authors to produce locally relevant works and prove that notion wrong.

## Fa'asamoa and Creative Writing

The *fa'asamoa* and its emphasis on storytelling are a clear advantage in terms of culturally supporting creative writing as a natural extension of an ancestral storytelling, an urge originating from a manner of understanding and sharing identity, most notably through the medium of *fagogo*. This is the tradition of elders passing down stories to younger generations, “Oral literatures that stretch back hundreds of years,” (Wendt 6). However, aspects of Samoan culture also work against the goal of motivating young people to explore creative writing. One of the main disadvantages is that the *fa'asamoa* is born from an oral tradition, and while people are beginning to recognize writing as an effective tool of communicating and sharing ideas (Jowitt 2 May 2013), it is still not emphasized to the extent that it is in societies with a longer history of recorded texts. Another major component of the *fa'asamoa* is the communal nature of society and the privileging of the group over the individual, reflecting in arts that highlight the community over a single person and deemphasizing independent expression. Lani Wendt Young summarizes the reality,

Our culture encourages a communal creativity. So much of our cultural activity uses storytelling—through dance, song, *fale aitu*... [there are] young people that are so creative and confidently artistic. But yes, this doesn't always show up in the writing—perhaps because it's a solitary activity. (Wendt Young 25 April 2013)

Another potentially discouraging cultural factor is the hierarchical nature of relationships and the fact that young people are expected to know their role and their place and recognize their inferiority to elders, never voicing opposition to them. The strict rules of these relationships are born out of the *va*, which Kneubuhl defines thusly,

The space between two people is not, as with the Papalagi, empty; the space is a distancing and it defines the relationship, it is the relationship. From the time we were children, we were taught to respect that space, that *va*. (Kruse Va'ai 4)

Acknowledging and respecting the *va* means that young people might feel that it is not their place to voice their opinions, a factor that I had not considered until speaking with students in American Samoa who told me that they valued their culture and would not want to disrespect their elders by asserting their individuality through writing. Personal expression thus becomes difficult to navigate, and the writer Alae Taule'alo summarizes it thusly, "Samoan culture can tend to retard or discourage personal expression...any artist is engaged with balancing out social and personal boundaries and helping a young person negotiate this in a communal society such as Samoa is vital," (Taule'alo 7 May 2013).

Beyond navigating cultural lines and attempting to discern whether writing as a young adult could be interpreted as culturally appropriate or not, there are also the more pragmatic deterrents of the Samoan education system. While many schools are moving away from the model of rote learning and MESC has guidelines in place for new curriculums, the reality is that many classrooms still run using this model of mostly memorization-based education. Since this learning model does not encourage independent or creative thought, students are not exposed to the fundamental trains of thought necessary in creative writing through their education alone. Another reality that can serve to discourage creative writing is the fact that many non-traditional forms of art are not understood or appreciated in Samoa, at least by the appraisal of Vanya Taule'alo, as she states, "Creativity in all of its forms is generally not understood—since people don't see a practical application for it in terms of jobs, it's hardly encouraged," (Taule'alo 3 May 2013), a fact that is reinforced by the lack of Samoan authors to serve as role models for the pragmatic application of creative writing and artistic skill into a career path.

### Curriculum Engagement

In terms of exploring the role of the curriculum in encouraging young Samoan writers, I examined the MESC policy that details the English curriculum for Samoan



secondary schools. After reviewing the “Strands, Aims and Achievement Objectives Progression” outline for reading and writing, it was fair to say that the curriculum statement focused on exploring different literary genres with students from an analytical perspective and did include objectives for “both factual, formal and imaginative writing,” as well as “develop[ing] a curiosity about English words and their meanings and origins,” (MESC). Furthermore, Ainslie Chu Ling-So’o, the director of the MESC language unit, further echoed these goals in her statement, “In any language activity, creative writing is encouraged right from the time children begin to read or write,” (Chu Ling-So’o 7 May 2013). While this would point to a curriculum that hinges on promoting creative and imaginative writing, many perspectives gathered on the curriculum implementation reflect a different reality.

Many of the people interviewed for the study were either teachers, currently or formerly, or had close ties to the education sector through projects such as the Newspapers in Education section of the *Samoa Observer*, and almost unanimously all pointed to current curriculums as a main reason why there was not a strong emphasis on creative writing among young Samoans. Statements such as, “Literacy and writing are being ignored by schools and students alike,” (Malifa April 25, 2013) and “They don’t have any, or very minimal, creative arts in any school,” (Meleisea May 1, 2013) were reflective of common themes in the conversations.

In all fairness, the goals of MESC and their curriculum plan are good indications of the future direction of creative writing in schools, and the fact that administrators and professors are actively working towards seeing more imaginative writing included in the education of young Samoans is honorable, and it does not stop at writing alone. As Angela Jowitt reiterated, “MESC is focusing more now on making reading an important agenda,” (Jowitt May 2, 2013), and the initiatives are hopeful, it’s just a matter of seeing these goals reflected in the reality of students’ education. One of the main reasons why these realities do

not play out is because of the achievement and performance gap between village and urban schools. As Jowitt states, “The standards do vary greatly from school to school,” (Jowitt May 2, 2013), and even with attempts to close the gap, it comes down to the distribution of resources, and as “village schools lack the resources and skills...creativity is not stressed at all,” (Heem May 1, 2013).

The resources in question are not indicative of just money or facilities, rather it points to skilled and specialized teachers trained in arts education—there’s the present cycle of not being able to attract or retain good teachers because of low salaries, and as Dr. Meleisea says, “Imagine teachers with no creative arts training teaching students—that’s not a proper way to approach teaching.” (Meleisea 1 May 2013). Other factors include unreceptive attitudes towards further arts inclusion—Vanya Taue’alo spoke about her repeated formalized attempts to establish a separate School of Creative Arts while teaching at NUS and described the process of constantly seeing this venture turned down, “enormously frustrating,” (Taule’alo 3 May 2013). In terms of seeing a greater focus on the arts, Vanya suggests that, “There needs to be programs for every area of artistic study, more focused programs... new methodologies must be taught,” (Taule’alo 3 May 2013). To give credit to the advocates for creative writing in Samoa, some young Samoans do find encouragement in pursuing creative writing through teachers, but as Kruse Va’ai reasserts, “It all depends on your environment. You’re so lucky when you get good teachers,” (Kruse Va’ai 7 May 2013). Like any other nation, Samoa needs to focus on producing an education of a similar caliber, with trained, skilled and engaged teachers and the proper resources for all of its students, regardless of whether they attend a rural or urban school.

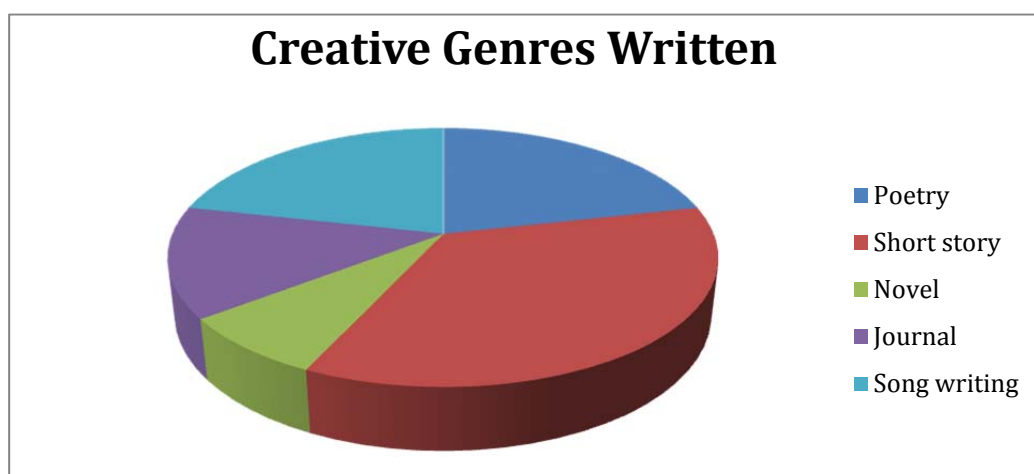
## Student Attitudes

Studying the realities of curriculum without including student reactions to these realities is unproductive, so I surveyed 40 students at NUS and USP, asking general questions

in order to gauge their exposure to and attitudes towards reading and creative writing. The most significant result of the data obtained was that every student surveyed responded that they wanted to see more creative writing in their curriculum, even the ones that had identified as non-writers. This kind of clear quantitative evidence—a 100% positive response to more creative writing in schools—underscores the reality that Samoan students do want to have more creative outlets open to them and are ready and willing to explore writing, the realities of the curriculum just need to reflect this fact.

Another surprising result that I found was that about half of the students surveyed said that they had written creatively in school, which did not correlate with the evidence that I had collected from my interviews, which had indicated that most Samoan students were not exposed to creative writing through their curriculums. Upon further reflection, I think that this result could be explained by miscommunication. The question was, “Where have you written these genres?” (see Appendix A) referring to the previously listed creative genres, but the wording could suggest writing done on school grounds, not necessarily in the classroom as part of the curriculum. This was further supported by contradictory responses to the following question, as some students who responded that they did not write in school also circled school years, confirming my suspicion that students were likely confused by wording.

An additional finding was the genres that students had written. The most



popular genre was short stories, followed by poetry and song writing. Having this data and knowing which genres students are most interested in exploring could work as a way of integrating these elements into more creatively focused curriculums. Song writing in particular would be an interesting genre for students to explore, as it not only works on written language skills but also works within the framework of the *fa'asamoa*, where song is celebrated both as a communal activity and as a manner of maintaining ties to the past and identity. Integrating this knowledge would be a way of acknowledging the MESC secondary curriculum English goals and incorporating them to make a creative focus in education a reality.

### Positive Impacts of Creative Writing and Expression

Further underscoring the importance of encouraging young Samoan writers is the myriad of positive benefits creative writing provides, primarily for the individual. Writing, as a form of creative expression, creates a direct and simple outlet for self-expression. As Emma Kruse Va'ai summarized in her interview, "I write whenever I feel like I need to express something," (Kruse Va'ai 6 May 2013), and in this way writing becomes an outlet as well as a cathartic exercise, a means of recognizing and dealing with the realities of the world in a productive way. Beyond the emotional benefits of writing, creative writing is a helpful tool in language acquisition skills, both in improving native languages and in promoting secondary language growth. A BBC article explores the language-refining benefits in this way, "Creative writing involves playful but rigorous work with language, [it] requires greater precision in expression. In order to say precisely what they mean, students have to be very careful in their use of vocabulary and idioms," (Morrissey 2002), bolstering the argument that creative writing would be a beneficial addition to the secondary language curriculum. Furthermore, creative writing necessitates independent and creative thought, processes that

are not encouraged in traditional rote learning. In terms of rote learning, Vanya Taule'alo has seen the memorization-based patterns of learning reflected in the art that her students produce, "I see that kids tend to model themselves and to copy, copy, copy—it's all the same stylization" (Taule'alo 3 May 2013) and suggests that exploring new avenues of thought would be a way to counter this unimaginative style of thinking and processing—which is where creative writing would prove to be so beneficial, encouraging thought patterns that otherwise may be unexplored through classroom learning.

Beyond simply helping the individual grow, encouraging writing would prove beneficial to society as well. Sano Malifa says, "There's a lot to share about Samoan culture, it's just not yet shared globally," (Malifa 25 April 2013) and encouraging students to explore written expression would enable them to share Samoan values, stories and perspectives with the world. The oral tradition is a strong way of maintaining culture, but it can only reach so far—words have the capacity to travel globally. Creative writing is one way that Pacific issues could be given light on the global stage. Artists can capture an insight born from raw emotion that can raise awareness of issues, such as climate change, in a way that inspires empathy in people, a real way to inspire change. In a similar fashion, encouraging writers is encouraging new intelligent and creative leaders, as Malifa states that the young writers "will be the people who will become our leaders, the ones who will promote education and stress its importance," (Malifa 25 April 2013).

Beyond raising awareness and promoting Samoan people to new heights in government and education, writing can be a way to further ground Samoan people in their culture, as "your creativity is where you see the spirit of your people, [so] there needs to be more emphasis on the arts in general," (Taule'alo 3 May 2013). Writing serves as a way to explore identity, not only on an individual level, but from the platform of society as well, and promoting writers also promotes, "the function of creative writing in promoting and affirming

a decolonised sense of self and national identity in these Pacific countries” (Va’ai 14).

Another important point is that encouraging the more Western medium of writing does not shift focus from the oral tradition, as it “is not a substitute or a replacement for oral communication but represents a lively, stimulating way to give new meaning to a somewhat lesser-used language skill,” (Morrissey 2002).

### Current Initiatives

This study focuses mainly on the need to establish more encouragement for creative writers, relying on arguments such as the fact that, “numerically the writers are a small group and the small group is writing for a limited audience” (Dunlop 66), but the encouragement of reading and in turn creative writing is growing exponentially in Samoa, in no small part due to the activism of groups, organizations and individuals dedicated to the task of promoting creativity among young Samoans. One of the most notable initiatives is the recent advent of the Bluesky and Samoa Stationery and Books writing contests run by the *Samoa Observer* under the supervision of Marj Moore. These contests were created under the model of a similar writing contest Marj had run at NUS, a competition that had inspired the Samoan author Lani Wendt Young to seriously consider writing as a career path through validating her voice. The contest was spawned by Marj’s frustration with the lack of adequate emphasis on writing and reading in Samoan schools. The contest offers prizes donated by Bluesky and Samoa Stationery and Books as incentive for students to play with creative writing, and having been successfully run for the past two years, it now includes primary through tertiary level students with an ever-increasing number of applicants from both Upolu and Savai’i. In terms of the goals of the competition, Marj says,

These kinds of competitions can unearth kids who really don’t know their potentials in terms of writing. It tells us that our children are really good writers. With this competition, we want to bring out writing for everyone, we want to pick out those ones at the very top and give them a chance to be published. (Moore 2012)

Another function of the contest is to offer students the opportunity to see their work published in the newspaper, a measure that Marj started with the Newspapers in Education section at the *Samoa Observer*, following the line of reasoning that seeing their work published would work to inspire and encourage students. Furthermore, Marj is currently negotiating with a publisher in New Zealand, hoping that in the future the creative work catalogued through the contest can be published on a larger scale.

There is a continued acknowledgement of the importance of nurturing young creative writers, as one of the judges from the *Samoa Observer* writing contest stated,

“Creative writing is such an individual activity and calling of the gift of the writer and his or her narratives has to be nurtured by all in society, so I would like to thank the parents and families, teachers and school communities who have supported these young writers in their literary journeys which has brought them to where they are today.” (Va'ai 2012)

This is reflected not only in the efforts to sponsor writing contests for students and the involvement of local enterprises like Bluesky and Samoa Stationery and Books in these initiatives, but in nurturing young readers. There has been a continued focus of both MESC and the government to promote reading in younger Samoans, attitudes reflected in comics such as this one originally published in the *Samoa Observer*.



This attitude is also reflected in the continued growth of Samoan libraries. The Library Association of Samoa has made major strides in achieving its mission statement, to “preserve Samoan culture, history and literature [and] support education, information literacy and lifelong learning for all Samoans.” (Library Association of Samoa). Some of the initiatives in place to support these objectives are things like the annual library week—last year there was a parade with over 600 participants, many dressed as their favorite literary characters, public story time and dramatizations of popular children’s stories as well as a keynote address on “the importance of continuing study and reading for lifelong success,” mirroring the week’s theme of “Reading is Your Pathway to Success” (Library Association of Samoa). Beyond motivating more Samoans to read through public efforts such as these, the Library Association also focuses on amending the issue of too few skilled librarians by training new librarians, most notably through efforts to subsidize university and training costs for new librarians with scholarships, a program in place both at USP and NUS. Angela Jowitt remarked, “We need to see this idea filter through to MESC in order for them to sponsor more training through scholarships,” (Jowitt 2 May 2013). This would fall in line with MESC’s unofficial agenda to see libraries built and maintained in every primary and secondary school.

Another organization that is engaging with the agenda of promoting creative outlets for more young Samoans is the Samoa Arts Council. Vanya Taula’alo, a member of the council, said that the newly formed organization is,

Focused on promoting the arts in all of its forms, in accessing education funding as well as developing opportunities for people to network and further develop their art...We’re creating exhibitions to highlight Samoan arts, both traditional and modern. (Taula’alo 3 May 2013)



These goals would give artists the social network necessary to share creative ideas and to find creative support through their peers, as well as the important task of finding interested audiences in their work.

Lastly, the work of local authors has been monumental in inspiring new Samoan writers, particularly those writing children's and young adult books. O Le Fa'aipoipoga is only one example of the many children's books that Emma Kruse Va'ai has written in both Samoan and English—it focuses on a Samoan girl, Lili's, wedding day. Through the story's inclusion of Lili's duty to feed the chickens alongside her decision to wear a blue wedding dress, it asserts both the pull of a traditional society with chores and duties rooted in a village lifestyle while also touching on the movement towards independent thought that young Samoans are experiencing. Touching on her motivations to write such books, Kruse Va'ai stated, "I will print locally to address the needs of children and students here and they're the only ones who matter" (Kruse Va'ai 6 May 2013), wanting to provide localized books in which children could recognize themselves and their lives. She even donated her bookset to free to Samoan schools, wanting them to reach the audience that most needed them. Similarly, Lani Wendt Young's writing and her work to promote writing with young Samoans has made her, "an ambassador for creative writing," (Jowitt 2 May 2013). The significance of children seeing their country produce writers and authors, role models to encourage them and to assert that their experiences are valid and that they are capable of writing themselves, cannot be overemphasized. It is through advocates like these authors and librarians like Angela Jowitt, through the movement towards more local bookstores like Samoa Stationery and Books, that encouraging young readers and writers becomes possible.

## Creative Writing Workshop Experience

As part of my research, I conducted two different writing workshops with local university students. The one hour NUS workshop, conducted with one of Fiona Collins' foundations class of 18 students, was co-hosted with another S.I.T. student, Amy Strawbridge, who was working with Fiona as her mentor. One student described the class as focusing "normally on dance and monologues." The class began with an icebreaker introduction that asked the students to think creatively and perform a dance move that described themselves. We encouraged them to trust their intuition, an important lesson in writing as well. As dancers, the students were receptive to that exercise.

The workshop focused on writing as a way of showing and sharing identity. It began with a basic prompt—"I'm from," and asked students to follow that train of thought. Students were asked to share their work with a partner, but were more interested in sharing their work with the group. They read their work aloud to the entire class and the results were all almost identical, very formulaic and basic writing that followed the pattern of, "I am (name). I am from (village). I am (birth order of siblings)." The value of creative thought and free self-expression was discussed and students were given a second prompt, "Describe a memory," which resulted in somewhat less formulaic responses. The students were quick to share their writings—most of which were emotionally-charged and all of which reflected the pillars of *fa'asamoa*. The students had written about moments they felt overwhelmed with love for their family, the death of loved ones, the aftermath of the tsunami in terms of what it had done to their villages, and experiences in church—they all hinged on church, family, or community. While the memories that they shared were rich experiences, they still followed familiar patterns and formulas in their paragraph and sentence structures. Almost universally,

after initially describing the experiences, students would continue with the sentence, “I felt (emotion).”

One deviated from this model and spoke eloquently and articulately about the death of her grandfather—she spoke to her emotions in a more natural and engaging way, allowing them to flow out of her rather than attempting to rigidly document them. She had not, however, written anything. She simply spoke to the class; her speech was both fluid and fluent, her language was varied and moving, and she had even included imagery. Following the success of this student’s oral response, the next exercise focused on speech rather than written language. Students were given the prompt, “I believe,” and then arranged in a line so they could whisper their response to the person in front of them. This design engaged the students with a different activity and encouraged them to trust their voice, and students clearly took to the oral arrangement, seeming to favor it. The oral focus was continued in the final exercise, “I fear.” This elicited the most creative responses, ranging from, “I fear goodbyes,” to “I fear enemies,” and even “I fear changing someone’s mind.” After this, a final quick dance exercise provided closure to the workshop.

The results were unexpected, but completely logical. The first surprise was that students were drawn to a group environment. I had not anticipated that response; from a Western mindset I had expected them to be initially shy and favor sharing their work with only one other person, but they valued a group setting—a preference which echoes communal values. The way of accessing creative energy through these students is orally rather than through written language because there is such a cultural emphasis on oral discourse. Creative avenues such as *fagogo*, drama and *fale aitu* have always been open to students and oftentimes they have more experience speaking than writing creatively. The majority of the class had never had any experience with creative writing before, and there was an overwhelming fear present in somehow “messing up” in writing—something that I attribute

to the fact that English is their second language, but more significantly to the fact that most of the writing exposure they have is with structured and formulaic academic writing—making it difficult to allow themselves to “let loose” and let creativity flow through the medium of writing. They have learned basic sentence structures to model and incorporate into their own writing, but have not moved past this. The same explanation accounts for their very literal interpretations of prompts. I encouraged them to explore beyond the boundaries of the writing that they were accustomed to and to recognize that creative writing had no rules dictating order, content, structure or organization, but it is impossible to “unteach” a class in only an hour. Without having been introduced to creative writing previously, how would they know to explore creatively rather than only engaging in the literal and following predetermined language structures? The results were indicative of everything that I had found in my research—students were unsure how to express themselves creatively due to a lack of exposure to creative writing in their education.

Few students participated in the second workshop at USP. While this may indicate a lack of student interest, it could also be explained by a unsuccessful marketing, student confusion over what a creative workshop entailed, or a more scientifically-based student body. Students at the school also all speak English as a second language, and the head of the student association suggested that their intimidation and fear in using English might have contributed to a low turn-out. In fact, only two people outside of the S.I.T. group attended. The initial workshop structure was adapted for a smaller group and hinged on word play games—designed to reduce hesitancy and eliminate fears associated with writing creatively for the first time in an organized setting. Writing prompts, including, “Describe your home to somehow who has never heard of it—what makes it significant, what makes it yours?” were then introduced. The responses were articulate though they included formulaic sentence and composition structure indicative of less experience in creative expression. Despite the small

size, those who participated did so wholeheartedly. The small number helped establish a trusting environment and allowed me to work more intimately with all of the group's writing. Students indicated that they wanted more creative writing in their classes, but were fearful of an extracurricular workshop, likely because of confusion over what such a workshop entailed.

One young woman had stood out from the group with some really beautiful work and I told her how intriguing I found her writing. She said that she had never written creatively in a classroom or workshop environment before and expressed disappointment that there would be no further workshops. Seeing her writing reaffirmed the need for more creative emphasis in Samoan classrooms—there need to be measures in place to find promising students like this young woman in order to promote and encourage their continued writing.

## Conclusion

The encouragement of both reading and creative writing in young Samoans has much room for growth. Seeing articulate, creative students bogged down by words rather than using them as an outlet to share themselves and their culture is discouraging, because their potential is stalled to the degree that they feel uncomfortable writing. However, looking at the strides being made and, most significantly, the fact that every student surveyed wanted to see more creative writing in their curriculum was heartening. Literature and written expression are still fairly recent introductions to Samoa in terms of its cultural history; keeping this in mind while evaluating the current writing system is paramount. While there is much to improve, Samoa has already made great strides through the dedicated work of advocates for literacy and creativity.

My hope is that someday soon Samoan children will be encouraged to read, and in those stories that will be both available and accessible to them, they will see reflections of themselves and their lifestyles. It is only through this exposure that students will recognize

their own capacities in writing creatively and sharing their stories with others. As Alae Taule'alo articulated, "I'd like Samoans to be able to produce literary works that the world cared about and wanted to read. I'd like Samoans to have access to the education and publishing opportunities that might facilitate this process," (Taule'alo 7 May 2013). With the continued work of individuals and organizations, the active interest and engagement of young Samoans, and a cultural attitude that asserts that creative expression is both significant and worthwhile, the hopes expressed by these writing and literacy advocates will come to fruition.

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## Glossary of Terms

*fa'asamoa*—"The Samoan Way," indicative of the cultural and historical lifestyle of Samoa and encompassing traditional values and relationships

*fagogo*—traditional oral storytelling method typified by a single narrator reiterating historically Samoan stories

*palagi*—anything that is non-Samoan, can refer to foreigners or foreign items and ideas

*va*—relationships, that must be respected diligently, that exist between all people and things

## Appendix A

### Creative Writing Survey

Age:\_\_\_\_\_ Nationality:\_\_\_\_\_ Gender:\_\_\_\_\_ Secondary School Attended:\_\_\_\_\_

1. Do you read for pleasure?      Yes      No
2. If yes, how often?  
    Few times a year      Few times a month      Few times a week
3. How often do you visit the library?  
    Everyday      Once a week      Few times a week      Monthly      Never
4. Do you write?      Yes      No
5. Which have these have you written? (circle all that apply)  
    Poetry      Short story      Novel      Journaling      Songwriting
6. Where have you written these genres? (circle all the apply)      School      Outside of  
    School
7. If in school, during which years? (circle all that apply)  
    Primary school      College      University
8. Do you share your writing with others?      Yes      No
9. Would you like to see more creative writing taught in your classes?      Yes      No