1Early literacy

Introduction

Early literacy is a highly contested, complex field of study with linguists, early childhood educators, anthropologists, psychologists, cultural theorist and sociologists all contributing viewpoints. This paper describes a project, Early literacy: Practices and possibilities that draws on a range of effective early literacy practices and avoids the burden of theoretical balkanisation common in approaches to teaching early reading and writing. Early literacy: Practices and possibilities has a pragmatic, problem solving `school focus'. A school focus is a way of providing early assistance in literacy for all children and in particular students considered to be `at risk' in literacy achievement.

In this paper we describe the development of Early literacy: Practices and possibilities and outline three unexpected outcomes that emerged from the project: (1) the use of critical tools to rethink early literacy practices, (2) teacher research for program development and monitoring student progress, (3) collaboration as a powerful force for reflection and creating new possibilities.

Project Development

Early literacy: Practices and possibilities grew out of a South Australian Department for Education and Children's Services (DECS) initiative which was funded through the Early Literacy Component (ELC, 1995) which is part of the DEETYA National Equity Program for Schools. The project design made use of and built on current and previous national and state early literacy intervention initiatives.

The project team was made up of DECS and university personnel. There were five curriculum officers from DECS and five researchers from the University of South Australia. The university teams included representatives from the language and literacy and early childhood education. An evaluation team, from another university added another perspective. An advisory committee provided feedback from a range of curriculum perspectives - from ESL, Aboriginal education and special education. The project involved over two hundred teachers from 19 schools.

Phases of the Project

The project design had four phases of approximately ten to twelve weeks in duration. Phase one was to explore the theory and practice in thirteen existing early literacy projects and programs. Phase two set out to develop case studies of whole school structures for providing a range of early literacy assistance or early intervention procedures. Phase three to trial and develop the materials drawn form the first two stages and phase four was for completion of materials.

In phase one the project team met for four days of workshops with a working party of teachers and curriculum officers. The forty representatives from a wide range of early literacy projects operating nationally and in South Australia ensured that the project was informed

by a range of perspectives and positions on early literacy. These projects included (to name just a few): Reading Recovery, First Steps, Speech Pathology, Special Education, English Language Acquisition for Aboriginal students and English as a Second Language. Discussion and debate amongst personnel involved in these projects and the project team revealed that the teaching of early literacy is a widely contested area.

Phase two focussed on nine schools developing case studies documenting their whole school approach to identifying, understanding and responding to the literacy learning needs of students. The principals and a literacy key teacher met with the project team for two workshop sessions to discuss, debate and document the information to be included in the case studies.

Phase three involved intensive work between the project team and staff of an additional ten schools as materials were developed and trialed. Teachers developed and refined the early literacy resource by conducting professional development sessions in their school, by trailing procedures with a focus child and by providing feedback about what teaching strategies and whole school procedures worked.

Phase four involved the completion of the project materials and the guidelines for training and development processes.

Early Literacy as a Field of Study

There are four current perspectives on emergent and early literacy: connectionism, cognitive and developmental psychology, social constructivism and critical theory (Crawford,1995). Each of these current perspectives on early literacy has a base in a range of theories and each perspective advocates different pedagogy. Each of these perspectives was present in the early literacy programs that were explored in this project.

Some programs were based on a connectionist perspective where learning the alphabetic code and word recognition are seen as the keys to successful literacy development. In this approach there is direct teacher led instruction. The view is that automaticity in decoding facilitates and precedes reading comprehension. In this view the act of reading can be broken down into a series of isolated skills, which can be arranged into a hierarchy, taught directly, and then brought back to the whole (Crawford 1995).

In programs largely based on cognitive and developmental psychology perspectives, literacy begins very early in life and children's literacy learning is characterised by a progression of developmental stages. In this perspective the tasks for emergent literacy should be devised so they are developmentally appropriate for children (Bredekamp, 1987; Morrow, 1993; Strickland & Morrow, 1993; Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Crawford, 1995).

In a social constructivist perspective, language and literacy are socially constructed and culturally specific. This view rejects the notion of fixed developmental phases, claiming there is no one set of universal, invariant developmental stages. In this view young readers

and writers engage in the same types of literacy processes, though at a less sophisticated level, as those engaged in by older children and adults. Literacy is based on the intent to make sense of social events (Vygotsky, 1978).

In critical perspectives on early literacy both language and literacy learning are facilitated when there is a close match between the discourse of home and school. In this view culture, social status and gender, intertwine to create a 'sociocultural identity kit'. Early literacy is a powerful source of identity formation and involves issues of social justice, and critical literacy. There is a focus on social action and change in the hierarchical power relationships in school, the early literacy curriculum and between the school and community (Solsken, 1993; Shannon, 1990).

Out of this array of early literacy theories and approaches Early literacy: Practices and possibilities was developed. The project team faced a dilemma about how to open up possibilities for incorporating useful teaching procedures from a range of perspectives. The team struggled to find a compromise between promoting the professional autonomy of teachers and schools - and providing a resource that was practical and which would contribute to the alleviation of the intensification of teachers' work. A decision was made to provide for teacher choice of practical examples whilst sometimes moving from theory to action and sometimes from practice to conception and theory (Lieberman, 1992). Guidelines were provided in a teacher friendly framework for decision making about strategies without being a `teacher proof-one-size-fits all-manifesto.'

Critical tools gathered from several sources were used to examine early

literacy practices. The critical tools assisted teachers to adapt strategies, assessment tools and models to their particular context and students' needs whilst taking into consideration children's social and cultural understandings.

Next, we discuss three unexpected outcomes that arose from the project: (1) the development of critical tools for educators to examine and reflect on their existing early literacy programs and practices; (2) teacher research in literacy; and (3) reaffirmation that collaboration, in its many forms, does generate new possibilities.

Critical Tools

The critical tools were gathered together from many sources so that teachers could reflect on their literacy practices. The use of critical tools meant that practices from a range of different theoretical perspectives were examined, challenged, revised and retained if the practices were found to be valuable. For example some long standing, but at times unfashionable practices, like explicit instruction in letter-sound relationships were challenged and retained because in many contexts the procedure is essential.

The critical tools used were the 'Four-Power Model' (Benn, 1981); critical questions based on Smyth, (1991); and the 8 T's Framework

(Comber & Cormack, 1995).

Table 1: The four power model

The 'Four-Power Model' contends that people require power over four crucial areas in their lives. Power over resources, information, decision making and relationships. The questions that framed these schools questions for rethinking early literacy practices included the following:
- Who has power over decision making in our school/classrooms?
- Who has power over information in our school/classrooms?
- Who has power over resources in our school/classrooms?
- Who has power over relationships in our school/classrooms?

Table 2: Critical questions

Critical questions were designed to assist teachers and schools reflect on, analyse and restructure their early literacy curriculum and in particular early assistance practices. Taken for granted ideas about language, culture, school structures and classroom practice were opened up to question and critique. Schools and teachers in their attempts to uncover and make clear the beliefs and values underlying their practice found critical questions a useful reflective tool.

Table 3: The 8 T's framework

The 8 T's framework invites reflection on 8 different aspects of the literacy curriculum: topics, techniques, tasks, talk, texts, tools, tests, and territories. By reflecting on these aspects of the curriculum, posing questions and proposing answers, the school staff can identify areas for rethinking literacy practices. Teachers listed priorities and action to be taken. A timeline for implementation and review was established as part of that change process.

Teacher Research
 The next unexpected outcome was teacher initiated research to collect

and monitor baseline data about literacy performance. Teachers in the project decided to collect data about what children can do in literacy, then implement programs to build on this. The teacher research component showed some similarity to school restructuring and reculturing projects such as the Coalition for Essential Schools, Accelerated Schools and the Comer process for reforming schools (Sizer, 1992; Comer, J., Haynes, N., Joyner, E., & Ben-Avie, M., 1996;

Lieberman, 1995; Levin & McCarthy, 1995; MaCarthy & Mayfield, 1996. The following process shows how schools initiated research on literacy achievement and developed programs for early literacy assistance: (1) big picture data, (2) setting benchmarks and targets, (3) collecting baseline data, (4) analysing data, (5) literacy action plans and programs, (6) evaluation.

Big picture data

At this stage questions are asked about what kind of information is needed about the entire school community and its operation before decisions can be made about what needs to be changed and improved. Whole school staff, teams and individuals list areas of concern which are then grouped in categories.

Sometimes questions include `What curriculum is being covered in literacy?' `What can be done to increase the participation of all students?' `What can be done for boys who don't read?' `What community texts can be incorporated into the literacy program?'

Teams of teachers, parents and community members form to gather data about each area that has been identified. For example, one group may look at community knowledge and resources and how these can be utilised. Another group may choose to look at existing literacy resources or different approaches used in the school: critical literacy, genre approaches, early intervention procedures. Another group may look at the school climate or culture and how the school is perceived by the community.

Setting benchmarks and targets

Next benchmarks and targets are set by comparing `what is' with `what if' or goals the class or school wants to achieve. Long term targets are set, such as `All students will be able to read emergent reading books by term 4' or `All year one students will be able to complete a simple research project' or `Participation rates will increase.' Setting targets or benchmarks can take several hours as consensus about priorities is developed. As benchmarks are set, major areas of focus emerge.

Collecting baseline data

To collect baseline data teams of teachers and community members are formed. For example a task force or team may be formed to engage in collection and critique of teaching strategies. Another group may decide to complete an audit of the oral language skills of all students. Another task force may decide to develop new assessment procedures to collect data. A range of data gathering procedures was provided for schools to adapt.

Analysing data

This stage involves analysis of data that have been collected and looking for patterns. Challenges and surprises in the data can lead to new plans for action.

Developing literacy action plans

Teams of teachers work at understanding the data collected. At times critical tools are used to monitor how the existing pedagogy may have affected the data. There is a search for possible solutions, possible programs to be implemented, possible teaching methodologies and

teaching strategies to implement. Decisions can be made about flexible grouping patterns across the school, teachers working across a range of year levels, alternative resource allocation, additional professional development, or perhaps developing and evaluating several different programs.

Evaluation

Once a program has been implemented time is taken to let the program settle down. After an agreed time the results of the program are gathered and displayed mapping the distance travelled to demonstrate learning in the program.

In the program Early literacy: Practices and possibilities examples were provided for each of the six steps in this teacher research process. In addition assessment procedures, teaching strategies, case studies of alternative models for organising early assistance were provided.

Collaboration Generates new Possibilities.

The third unexpected outcome was that collaboration between university, schools, and project officers can generate new possibilities in the conflicted hot bed of early literacy pedagogy. For many of us attractive ideas like collegiality and collaboration are often imbued with a global sense of virtue (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1991) and in the quick, slick 90's, collegiality may have lost some of its shine.

The project team knew that collaboration requires patience and that each representative of each constituency needs time to express his or her personal and institutional points of view and to absorb the views of others (Ellis & Joslin, 1990). Members of the project team worked hard to listen to one another, understand differences, realise their strengths and weaknesses and understand the perspectives of others. Time is needed to lay the foundations for effective collaboration and to overcome preconceptions and stereotypes (Ellis & Joslin, 1990) and time is needed for trust to develop which is the basis for effective partnerships (Borthwick, Padak, Shaklee & Peck, 1992, in Russell & Flynn, 1992)

This project stretched the collaborative process to new limits because of the number of people and voices involved. The project assembled up to eight people from different backgrounds, universities, schools and curriculum division, and different educational fields- early childhood, primary, secondary. The project team changed membership at various phases, for example, at the end of Phase two the DECS group retained one curriculum officer, and added two others while university teams also changed at different phases. Smaller groups with similar characteristics and backgrounds who know exactly what they are trying to establish are more likely to be cohesive.

Despite the lack of time and frequently changing membership of the group a variety of productive forms of collaboration took place. There were four easily identified forms of collaboration. The team needed to move in and out of these four forms to sustain a productive group.

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Table 4
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First, comfortable collaboration which is a chatty, supportive sharing
 of anecdotes and experiences (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1991). Comfortable
 collaboration can focus on technical skills concerned with sharing
 strategies. The care and comfort level of the participants is the main
 consideration. Comfortable collaboration can keep spirits high.
 Experiences of comfortable collaboration can be described as-
`an opportunity to meet, share and talk with other teacher whose
experiences are similar'
`sharing ideas with others'
`time to discuss work with others'
`It is good to hear that other people are feeling the same as me.'
Second, structured collaboration also known as contrived collaboration
 (Hargreaves, 1989) may occur when an administration or powerful group
 member(s) sets up formal, specific bureaucratic procedures for people
 to work together to implement new approaches or techniques devised
 outside the school or organisation.

Structured collaboration can occur when small teams or committees are
 set up to work on curriculum tasks . Often there is a flat democratic
 structure without a nominated leader in the team. This framework does
 infer that a team is working according to a project or research design
 specified in a "top down" or hierarchical manner. It is inferred that
 someone has the major game plan and the team will collaborate to
 achieve the expected outcomes not generate new goals, new knowledge or
 directions.
Structured forms of collaboration may be necessary in the beginning to
 lay the foundation for later critical collaboration and collective
 action. The use of structured collaboration moves groups from
 individualism and competition and takes us beyond the romantic faith in
 the capacity of the individual (Holly, 1991).
In structured collaboration teachers may listen and clarify for each
 other's ideas but may not move into more probing questions.
Comments include-
`You can get more done when a team shares the work.'
`Working with people I don't know very well helps me clarify my ideas.'
Third, critical collaboration, moves beyond appreciation of another's
 point's of view to analysing values within the bigger picture of the
 broader social and global context. In critical collaboration ideas are
 challenged by colleagues. The ideologies and historical antecedents of
 current practice are critically examined. What is usually taken for
 granted about language, early literacy instruction, learning and power
 is critiqued.
Questions are raised about school and classroom practices, expert
 knowledge is examined and there is an attempt to uncover the values and
 interests served by the structure of schooling (Carr & Kemmis, 1986;
 Smyth, 1987; Zeichner, 1994). In the process of generating critical

questions attention is paid to not only what is included in a world
view but also what is left out and silenced (Giroux 1984), not only
what we do as teachers but also what we need to do (Cochran-Smith and
Lytle, 1992).

The notion of quick and easy consensus is avoided as a variety of world
views can lead to new thinking. In critical collaboration people said:
` The questions that we were continually asked were, 'But why?' This
took us back to the theoretical issues and asked us to look at the
purpose. These of questions that made us look broader and deeper into
practices.'

`Early literacy: practices and possibilities gave us information about
what other schools were doing. We visited other schools in the project
to see what they had in operation. We adapted the ideas to our school
context. Sometimes we liked what we saw and others we did not. This
helped us to reflect on and critique our own practice. '

`I started to question institutionalised classroom practice like too
much teacher-led discussion. I need to be on the look out for the
deficit approach to teaching/learning in my own teaching.'

The work of critical collaboration powerful and informative but it is
unsettling, in part because the literature does not suggest general
courses of action assumed to be effective across diverse school and
community contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992).

Critical collaboration moves into reflecting about the ethical and
moral purposes of school (Sparks-Langer & Colton 1991) and away from
what Van Manen (1977) calls the technical issues which focus on narrow
technical skills or strategies to do with managing. While skills and
strategies are important- the bigger picture of what matters - values
the underlying principles - become challenged in critical
collaboration.

Fourth, creative collaboration moves beyond challenging current
assumptions into the world of generating and inventing new models and
possibilities for action.

Creative collaboration has an action component where new ideas are

grown from both letting go of the old and hanging on to that which can
inform. This kind of collaboration calls for non defensive reasoning
and expansive divergent thinking. The thinking is more that just
brainstorming because team members are often aligned as through the
process of critical collaboration they have developed a community
discourse or what Miller (1987) termed a `collective valid.' The
collective valid is a local construction made up of shared meanings and
working definitions for describing and classifying reality.

The process of creative collaboration is a dynamic one. Educators said:
`We were encouraged to work in teams and I worked with Ev. We both
developed expertise in areas other than those we were familiar with.
She learnt about methodology for students with high potential and later
won a leadership position with this focus, whilst I learnt strategies
to identify students at risk.'

`We were able to trial critical reflective practice as we reviewed and

implemented changes to our transition from Kindergarten to school. All
the staff from child parent centre to year 3 worked in groups and used
the critical frameworks within the Early literacy: Practices and
possibilities resource to formulate a set of questions pertaining to
transition. This opened up discussion and brought into the open a range
of issues that we were then able to discuss. This led into the next
stage where we came up with solutions that we were able to trial in our
new procedures'.

`If there was no collaboration our Early Assistance Plan would not have
been developed in as much detail. We would not have had access to as
many of the range of resources, and assessment tools. We would then
have been unable to develop or refine the strategies to meet our needs.'

Collaboration was a feature of all four phases of the project in
workshop days and in the case studies of school organisation.
Interaction with others led to informal linkages and spin-offs for all
participants of the schools, universities, DECS and members of the
project teams. This networking included knowing who to talk to, also
what's available and how to go about accessing it. (Borthwick, Padak,
Shaklee & Peck, 1992).

The project teams' constructive criticism and insistence on reflection
on practice assisted teachers who were less used to making a
reflective, critical stance. The collaborative workshop processes and
the critical tools encouraged the participants to reflect on practice.

The project operated at the two levels needed for improvement; the
level of teacher as an individual and the level of the school as an
organisation. Teachers' improvement is central to school improvement.
Overall school change and improvement occurred through collaborative
reflection on practice.

Summary

Collaboration is not easy to achieve and is bound to involve conflict.
However the partnerships of universities, teachers and government
departments can result in purposeful inquiry. Researchers and school
personnel can provide unique contributions that are vital to the
success of a project of this kind. Further unexpected outcomes often
occur as participants learn from one another, build long lasting
relationships and challenge, refine or even change their own
frameworks.

Early literacy: Practices and possibilities was a result of creative
collaborative work. The unexpected outcomes included the development of
critical tools for educators to examine and critically reflect on
individual and whole school early literacy practices that had developed
from a range of theoretical perspectives. The teacher initiated
research to collect and monitor baseline data about literacy
performance involved a `school focus' for rethinking literacy
practices. The research conducted by schools dealt with real issues

that were seen as relevant to participants and tailored to the needs of

the school and the community. Collaboration, in its many forms, and
with its many conflicts and tensions, did generate new possibilities.

Table 1

The Four Power Model

The 'Four-Power Model' was developed by Benn (1981) adopted by the
Brotherhood of St Laurence as a tool towards understanding and tackling
both the causes and effects of poverty. This approach contends that
people living in poverty often are limited in the range and choices
available to them, in particular they require power over four crucial
areas in their lives. These are identified as a lack of:

- power over resources,
- power over information,
- power over decision making
- power over relationships.

The questions that frame these schools action are

Who has power over decision making in our school/classrooms?
Who has power over information in our school/classrooms?
Who has power over resources in our school/classrooms?
Who has power over relationships in our school/classrooms?

The following is one example of the four power model used as a critical
framework to examine whole school practice.

Decision making
How are decisions in this school made?
Are the decision-making processes inclusive of all stake-holders,
parents, students and staff? Who gets listened to? What would inclusive
decision-making look like at this school?

Relationships
Which students, staff, parents are visible in our school? Which are
not? How is participation defined and/or understood? What structures
are in place to ensure a recognition of self-worth and the worth of
others?

Information
Is information accessible to all members of the school community? What
model of information sharing is used? Who is able to make use of the
information?

Resources
Who gets to use the resources in our school? How are the resources
displayed? Who chooses the resources? How is access to the resources
monitored?

Table 2

Critical questions

Critical questions are designed to assist teachers and schools reflect on, analyse and restructure their practice. What is usually taken for granted about language, culture, school structures and classroom practice is opened up to question and critique. Schools and teachers in their attempts to uncover and make clear the beliefs and values

underlying their practice have drawn on a variety of sources to assist them formulate these critical questions. Critical questions are sometimes built around a specific model of examining practice. At other times critical questions are listed around a particular task, practice or context. (The following questions were generated to explore parent programs).

Describing
What is currently happening?
Who is involved?
When are parents involved?

Informing
Why do we involve parents?
What do we do when parents are involved?
What are the major strategies used to involve parents?
What does this tell us about our beliefs?

Confronting
How did thing come to be this way?
What assumptions have we made about involvement?
What factors helped shape our work with parents?
What helps keep these approaches and processes in place?
Whose interests are being served by our current practice?
Whose interests are excluded?

Reconstructing
What do we consider to be important about parent involvement?
How could we better serve the interests of the students and the community with whom we work?
What could we do differently?
How will we make these changes?
What do we need to work on to effect these changes?
What resistance might we meet?
How will we tackle that?

How will we know if we are making effective change?

Table 3

The 8 T's Framework

The 8 T's framework (Comber & Cormack, 1995) uses 8 different aspects of the literacy curriculum. These eight aspects are topics, techniques, tasks, talk texts, tools, tests, and territories. The following example is from teachers who used the 8 T's framework to critically analyse and review their current practice on working with the community and plan for further action.

Content and
explanation   Critical questions   Answers   Possible
action
Topics
• issues and
content for newsletters. information night
• parent teacher interviews
• in the curriculum

Who chooses these?

What assumptions have been made about their importance and
value and by
whom?Principal and teachers are
deciding on most of the content and issues.• establish a parent
reference group
• investigate three way interview procedures
• explore ways to access community topics
Techniques
• Training and inservice available
• structures that
exist to communicate with parents

Who decides on the inservice?
What format does
the inservice take?
Whose contributions are valued?
Who may be excluded by this format?
Whose interests do the informing structures serve?
Are these structures two way?Inservice is teacher directed
Format is small
group
communication is basically one waySurvey parents
Build on current inservice format by adding buddy support
work with a parent reference group on two way communication

staff T & D in communication
skills
Tasks
The tasks parents and community members do in relation to students'
literacy learning

What are the unwritten rules about these task?
Who has the knowledge about how to do this task? How are tasks
allocated?Parents are active helpers in listening
to reading, giving extra support to 'at risk readers.

Some parents attend training sessions● extend the range of task parents
are involved in
● provide a range of
T & D about aspects
 of literacy.
● publish a range of tasks that parents might want to be involved in.
● work with parent group to prioritise
and organise the
T & D.
Talk
The talk that
happens between
staff and community members

Who sets the agenda?
is information transmitted or exchanged?
What and whose
talk is valued?
What is not talked about?Formal talk situations have the agenda set
 by the teacher, informal talk is more likely to be initiated by
parents.● investigate three way conference processes
Texts
the sorts of texts that are available in the community.

 What ways are community texts utilised?
W ho decides which community texts to access/
What texts are excluded/included?Usage of some community texts, eg
catalogues
Students encouraged
to bring texts from home
Students use home language in the classroom in some situations● extend
the range of community
text s
● build on current practice
Tools

What community members get to use when doing literacy tasks

What tools do community members have access to ...in
the community...
in the school?
Who decides access?
How is access monitored?Not sure about community tools and access
Limited access to computers and photocopier,
telephone and fax at school. No clear monitoring process in place.●
find out more about community tools and availability
● establish policy
and set up a
monitoring process re school tools.
Tests
Used to make judgements about progress or ability

What are the hidden tests that parents, community members face at
 school?
How are judgements made about parenting skills, community literacy
skills?
How are results communicated to parents/community members? judgements
are made if parents are involved or not involved to
deduce their interest in the child's schooling

Communication styles vary according to the teacher.● awareness raising
among staff regarding this issue.

T & D in communication skills
Territories
Where staff and parents can or cannot
 go in the school or community

who controls what territory?
Where do parents
feel most welcome?
In what area are parents/community members able/not
able to work with students.

Who makes these decisions?Flexible

Teacher can have significant impact in this area● awareness raising
● providing a variety of forums

Forms of collaboration

Comfortable collaborationStructured collaborationCritical
collaboration
Creative collaboration

goal-sharing what works

within comfort zone

chatty testimonials of ideas that work

sharing and connecting experiences

positive interpersonal
relationships

informal and loosely structured groups

focus on what we know
focus on creating shared knowledgegoal-set by leader

out of comfort zone
to work with people
with different perspectives

structuring tasks for
shared leadership

tasks are devised by
manager/leader/ teacher

co-operative skills
and group maintenance
structured for
democratic
participationgoal-surface and
challenge
mental models

discomfort and
dissonance

critique of practice,
habits and
expectation

 analyses values
and practice
within the broader
social context

promotes intellect
ual conflict and
conflict and

exploration of
consciousness

 groups critically
reflect on practice

uncovering conceal
ed knowledgegoal-moving visions
 to creative action

 anxiety and excitement from
uncertainty and instability

 imagining and
image making

 generating collective thinking

 promotes inquiry leading to action

 groups synergise energies to create
possibilities

 focus on constructing new knowledge

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