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**A Blue Ocean Strategy for Schools:
Team Learning and Teaching**

Preparing the next generation for a lifetime of learningTM

Alexander L. Terego

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Alex@AlexTerego.com

A Blue Ocean Strategy for Schools: Team Learning and Teaching

A lesson from industry worth heeding

Two business professors, W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne recently wrote a seminal book, “The Blue Ocean Strategy.” It transformed the way many businesses look at themselves and the markets (*red oceans or blue oceans*) they compete in.

Much of their analysis, the lessons pointed out and solutions proposed have applicability to organizations other than businesses. It’s their clever use of a colored-ocean metaphor, not the specific subject matter of the book, which should resonate with those interested in schools, reform and children.

Taxes generated directly and indirectly by businesses pay for schools; in turn schools provide a work force. It was always intended as a virtuous circle; but now it is broken.

Because schools are part of the ocean of society, along with businesses, government and the armed forces, the goal of this article is to set Kim and Mauborgne’s ideas and remedies about permanent reinvention into the context of American schools.

Employers of all kinds demand candidates with four skills: critical thinking, problem solving, communication skills, *and most of all collaboration or team-working skills*. As everyone from the president on down has noted, schools are still supplying students for old world skills: stressing memorization, repetition and test taking. If, as Secretary Arne Duncan said, “*We must educate our way to a better economy,*” then America urgently needs to address this imbalance.

Ask any state governor or chamber of commerce looking to attract a new plant or office to their area, and they will tell you that 21st century investment capital and the jobs it creates will *only* flow to locations of appropriate education. Business leaders are in the business of business not education, and looking for the best educated workers is a high priority. Globalization ensured choices; consequently school districts are in fierce competition not only with other states but the world.

The goal of school reform must be a radical re-think to avoid long-term decline. If reformers simply tinker, schools will not go away; they will become less relevant to *all* their stakeholders. We cannot let this happen; it’s a national security issue.

Fresh thinking is the mission of this paper. Its focus is on co-operative or team learning/teaching because, if the four 21st century skills were organized in a hierarchy, collaboration would be the pinnacle. Other papers on critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving and communications will follow.

What are Red Oceans?

The red oceans of Kim and Mauborgne’s book represent known and well-understood spaces where boundaries are accepted, rules understood, and both have been around for a long time. Their products have long since turned into commodities, and their legacy has stifled innovative thinking.

The stakeholders in red oceans feel powerless. Red-ocean management makes incremental changes and modifications; instead of exploring transformative opportunities. Their world view is one where knowledge is static, conditions are unquestioned and they are powerless to effect change.

What are Blue Oceans?

Blue oceans represent unrecognized opportunities. Increasingly they are knowledge-based and complex. They rely on the nimble acquisition and effective deployment of knowledge. They are the result of leveraged change because they encourage teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, a willingness to look at the big picture and communicate visions clearly. Leadership constantly challenges itself to adopt new ways of thinking and managing. Ambiguity is seen as an asset.

The good news for us is that the author's research proves that the vast majority of blue oceans are created out of red oceans by incumbents, when boundaries and rules are breached by management with altered thinking. As educators operating in the ultimate red ocean - a monopoly designed before the industrial revolution - this should give us hope.

One way to begin migrating to blue ocean schools:

It's evident that sitting in rows and listening to lectures – didactic teaching dating back two centuries – does little to prepare students to collaborate on problems, let alone think critically or communicate. If we are to reinvent and reform our schools, fostering a world-class team learning and teaching culture – at all levels – is a vital first part of any blue ocean strategy, and done right it will self-perpetuate as more see its value.

“Teams are one of the most productive resources that companies have; provided that they operate with clear goals, effective process and shared accountability,” states I.B.M. Why shouldn't that also be the case in schools?

According to school researchers Qin, Johnson and Johnson, *“Co-operative small group learning has been the subject of hundreds of studies. All the research arrives at the same conclusion: there are significant benefits to students who work together on learning activities. Teams outperformed individuals on all types of learning and across all ages.”*

Conclusion:

Our schools are facing monumental challenges. Schools are under-funded, but more money is only part of the answer. Current laws mandate a form of teaching that does not align with the needs of employers, or the way children learn, let alone their emotional need for safety. These circumstances make fresh thinking a necessity and listening to what employers and students need is a great start.

I recently spoke at a conference of superintendents; one idea under discussion was *mass customization*, tailoring teaching and learning to the individual. Most were pessimistic. I am not; in a team culture everybody learns and contributes at their own pace.

Alex Terego teaches courses on critical thinking, decision making and collaborative learning, and offers free resources for teachers at <http://www.alexterego.com>. Or contact him at Alex@AlexTerego.com.