

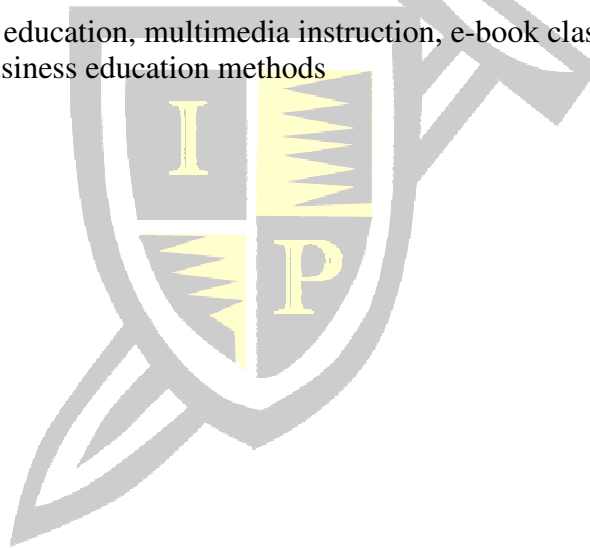
## Digital pedagogy the millennials' way: E-book as a course project

William W. Arnold  
Pepperdine University

### ABSTRACT

This article traces the experience of university students in an upper division business course as they collectively authored an e-book as their course project. The professor designated the title of the book and the three themes that provided the structure of the book: service, leadership, and purpose. The 25 students at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California, executed the project following the leaderless organization model and its variations adopted by organizations with flattened hierarchies and fast-paced operations. The instructional approach was adapted to the values and preferences that typify millennials. The professor divided the students into five work teams, with each team focused on key tasks and composed of members with the proficiencies needed to complete the project. The article presents dynamics of the process including interactions among the teams and guidelines followed by the professor. The project culminated in a completed book presented to the students on the final day of class.

Keywords. Millennials' education, multimedia instruction, e-book class project, e-pedagogy, digital class projects, business education methods



## INTRODUCTION

This article describes the creation of an e-book written by undergraduate students in an upper division business seminar. The students were enrolled in the Business Division, Seaver College, Pepperdine University, Malibu, California. The campus of Pepperdine University, a faith-based institution, is located 35 miles northwest of Los Angeles and is set on rolling hills with vistas that overlook the Pacific Ocean. The striking setting, the school's commendable ratings, and the international emphasis of its programs attract a student population that is diverse and globally represented.

The title of the upper division business administration course was Current Issues in Management and was taught in the Spring of 2016. The course theme was strengthening lives for purpose, service and leadership. The stated course goals were to develop abilities in teamwork, application of knowledge, leadership, and critical thinking.

This article describes a pilot approach employed in teaching a business seminar course. The approach tested two classroom pedagogies: (a) creating and producing a student-written e-book as a class project and (b) use of the leaderless classroom model to plan, implement, and produce the book.

## THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF PEDAGOGY

The evolution of education can be traced by following the evolution of its pedagogies, and specifically the emergence and adoption of instructional aids, but also by gaining insights into the accompanying cultural and behavioral changes.

### Millennials

The dominant contextual factor in producing the e-book by the students was their generational label as millennials. Reflecting their values and characteristics was critical to the test, which was a pilot endeavor. Millennials have shifted in distinct ways from previous generations in their values, expectations, and lifestyle preferences (Deloitte Touche Foundation, 2016). These shifts challenge instructors to engage millennials and offer value that millennials perceive to be meaningful. In line with millennials values, the coursework needed to serve millennials' self-needs and self-interests. In addition, traditional academic methods can now be adapted due to millennials' ease of using electronic devices, apps, and multiple forms of digital communication.

According to a whitepaper published by the International Education Advisory Board (IEAB) entitled *Learning in the 21st Century: Teaching Today's Students on Their Terms* (n.d.), characteristics millennials share include: "They like to be in control, like choice, group-oriented, inclusive, practiced users of digital technology, think differently, more likely to take risks..." (IEAB, n.d., p. 4). In drawing a contrast between teams of the past and those of today, Haas and Mortensen (2016) found a shift toward teams that are more diverse, digital, and dynamic. As pointed out by Taylor (2012), most millennials since birth have grown accustomed to the ease of accessing information by digital means.

## Technology

Technology in many forms has fused with novel methods to transform business education from the traditional textbook and lecture era. As Taylor (2012) stated, millennials have distinct expectations related to technology, communication, and means of accessing information. In his book *The Third Wave: An Entrepreneur's Vision of the Future*, Case (2016) discussed moving from simple Internet interactions to a world in which interactions are ubiquitous. In his view the Internet can democratize learning and also personalize education to the needs of each student.

In an article about the impact of using YouTube to enhance student content learning Alwehaibi (2015) concluded that information technology contributed to enriching education by offering opportunities to use new learning resources. Business academicians are stepping up the pace of preparing students to use technology effectively (Crittenden & Crittenden, 2015). According to Crittenden and Crittenden, competitive pressures, customer demands, and the need to lower costs are pressuring companies to accelerate adoption of technology. To punctuate the need to integrate millennials into organizations, business leaders are being trained to help them connect with millennials (Huang & Gellman, 2016).

A concluding comment in a whitepaper covering teaching today's students emphasizes that instruments in educators' hands are not as important as how they use them to effectively shape the learning environment for students. "Great teachers using digital technology with certified computing skills will be the most powerful educators in the 21st century" (International Education Advisory Board [IEAB], n.d., p. 18).

## Leaderless Teams

In addition to meeting the needs of millennials and benefitting from technologies, the phenomenon of leaderless organizations has proliferated as communication via the internet has become prevalent in academia and work (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006).

According to Bernstein (2016), organizations can benefit from aspects of self-management, especially in an environment that requires high adaptability. Do results just happen, though? Catalyzed by the ease of online communication, entrepreneurial organizations have thrived while centralized organizations have failed (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006). The authors identified requisite conditions for relatively leaderless organizations to grow and prosper. Conforto (2016) asserted that innovative projects can be effective when combined with specific processes. The author attributes development of improvisational proficiencies to building cultures that recognize and view changes positively, establish team structures that are conducive to project environments, and encourage practices and tools that facilitate change.

## Motivation

Organization and team performance in the leaderless environment needs motivation. Kouzes and Posner (2016) provided a perspective on leadership that ties leading to becoming exemplary, that is, believing in becoming the best. The authors suggested instilling a set of values and a vision greater than a person's present capacity. They recommended finding opportunities for growth at the edges of abilities and then learning as a daily habit. Pink (2009) concluded in his book *Drive* that strong motivation is intrinsic and self-directed, fueled by opportunities for autonomy, mastery and purpose. Participating in creating goals results in activity that becomes its own reward, including meeting challenges and learning that lead to high productivity and satisfaction (Pink, 2009).

In an article on promise-based management Sull and Spinosa (2016) emphasized leaders need to fulfill promises they make. Leaders who succeed in managing and delivering on promises strengthen interactions and relationships among team members, which also encourages the entrepreneurial spirit. The promise to the Pepperdine students was that their goal was reachable and they would have the resources to complete the project.

## **ORGANIZATION**

### **Class Structure and Composition**

The idea of an e-book came about after examining a typical syllabus for the course. The very traditional approach seemed to lack the potential to engage students given the characteristics of millennials. The novel aspects of creating an e-book could offer a way to capture millennial students' voices concerning issues they felt were most important, as well as provide a vehicle to express their apprehensions and feelings as they neared the end of their university experience. In addition, the prospect of reinforcing the students' aspirations toward higher levels in terms of life purpose and service appeared to have merit. The intense immersion in creating the e-book could send the students into the world with a stronger resolve to make a difference.

The students in the class represented a rich mix of diversity as indicated in Figure 1 (Appendix). In the class of 25, 60% were born outside the U.S. and 80% of students had lived or studied outside the U.S. Several students had lived and studied in two to six countries. The parents of more than 50% of students owned a business, were career professionals, or worked in diplomatic services. Nearly 25% of students planned to work in other countries following their senior year at Pepperdine, and that included students born in the U.S. Two or more had launched their own business and planned to continue these following their graduations.

The first of two assigned texts was *The Starfish and the Spider* (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006). The authors contrasted the characteristics, operating modes, and outcomes of organizations based on hierarchical leadership versus relatively leaderless organizations, especially those that thrive on the ability of people to connect by applying online connections. Among the examples the authors suggest are Craigslist, Wikipedia, Netflix, WordPress, and Alcoholics Anonymous. The power of the leaderless organization is its ability to innovate, regenerate, and grow without direction from a "head." The second assigned text was Pink's (2009) book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. Topping the list of powerful motivators, Pink identified the opportunity to do work we love and have never done before. The professor supplemented the texts with articles covering related subjects including organization structure, leadership, team performance, motivation, and millennials (see Table 1, Appendix).

### **Presentation of the E-Book to the Class**

The professor had taught previous courses in which he had used the leaderless team approach with success. In addition, he was experienced in running leaderless teams in the business environment.

On the first day of class the professor announced that as their course project the students would publish a book that represented their voices as millennials. The professor designated the title and subtitle of the book, *Touch: A Millennial Conversation About Great Leadership, Service, and Purpose*. In addition to the book title, three themes formed the structure for the

book: leadership, service, and purpose. The class members themselves would write and produce the book.

The initial reaction by students was stunned silence, followed by questions, “What does this mean?” “How are we going to do this? The professor explained that everyone would be learning and participating together. His explanations and the class discussion helped quell concerns and skepticism turned into enthusiasm.

Numerous studies have shown that millennials want to be challenged. They want to be presented with difficulty, yet have attainable end goals (Kouzes & Posner, 2016; Pink, 2009). The students believed in the attainability of authoring and producing the e-book. The goal was not too difficult and the resources were available.

### **Assignment of Project Teams**

The class was organized into five teams of five members each. None of the team members had worked together previously. Each team was represented with specific strengths: communication, global perspective, information technology, marketing skills and leadership abilities. Teams were formed around functions required to manage the project and produce the e-book:

- Communications      Established how to connect with teams and class members.
- Editing                Collected all written text.
- Graphics                Focused on page layout, typography, and cover image.
- Info. Technology      Selected online productivity tools and social media.
- Schedule                Alerted teams about milestones and monitored due dates.

One individual on each team was appointed to be the communication liaison to the professor and to communicate back to team members. Each team member had a specific knowledge-based strength

- point person to centralize communication;
- experience living in another country;
- creative/solution-based marketing skills;
- innovative/technology skills;
- distinctive leadership abilities/skills.

The selection of the five members on each of the five teams was based on each student’s claims of experience and specialized knowledge. Following the formation of teams, the professor invited any student to contact him privately and request a reassignment to another team if they wished.

Knowledge-based team membership strengths represented diversity within each team. Championing new ideas and stimulating a culture that welcomes diversity and dissent encourages originality and innovation (Case, 2016). Building a culture that encourages change while also establishing appropriate team structures was emphasized by Conforto (2016).

## **METHODS AND IMPLEMENTATION**

### **The Classroom Environment**

The class time was relatively unstructured. The professor placed an agenda on the board before each class meeting and distributed an article from the suggested reading list (Table 1, Appendix). As students came into their classroom for each class, they turned on their computers, and conversed with each other. The professor made necessary announcements and briefly discussed the distributed article. Intermittently during the class time of an hour and a half the students used their computers and met with their teams. The students played music during class, with teams taking turns with choosing a favorite selection. The music selections represented all students and each culture was represented. Periods of silence extended during many classes as students self-engaged and connected online. Students freely talked to their team members and often went to other teams to dialogue. At times the professor joined a group and listened to discussions.

### **Leaderless Classroom**

No team had a designated team leader. Instead, teams granted leadership to any member depending on the specific task for which the member's expertise was needed. Assigning and allowing no formal leader of each team maximized individual autonomy, which intrinsically motivated team members to contribute to reaching the goal (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006).

Self-organization and decision making was critical to contributing to the learning experience of each team, as well as to the performance of the team and the cultural whole of the class. Each team organized its operations differently. Team members actualized a leaderless classroom, relying on digital communications as the primary link for interacting among themselves. Each team had specific deliverable timelines for completing assignments as set by the editing team. All work and transmission of work was accomplished electronically.

Each team continually reorganized to meet needs as they arose. The professor relinquished day-to-day direction and instead relied on each team to design its own operations. Two key elements, measurability and accountability, were avoided. The professor demonstrated the ability to avoid interfering with the self-organizing process. A defining tenet of leaderless work also requires the leader to let go of all expectations in order to serve the creative process unconditionally (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006).

As facilitator, the professor retained the role of calling out the strategy and tactics that bridged the process into the deliverables the teams were producing. This task required vigilance and sensing critical strategic shifts in the midst of confusion, change, and ambiguity. An important objective was to achieve a natural and effective flow. The willingness to unconditionally trust the unfolding events benefits the outcomes. Nothing about the process required compliance. Rather, the essence was commitment (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006).

As asserted by Brafman and Beckstrom (2006), "When you have all the legs working, a decentralized system takes off" (p.87). The leaderless organization collapses if the parts do not



purposely and directly connect with the whole. The professor needed to model the principles personally and professionally, including words both said and unsaid.

### **Inherent Motivation**

The class members and the professor manifested a flow that was apparent in the classroom. In their research on flow in the classroom, Culbertson, Fulgar, Simmons, and Zhu (2014) focused on student interest in the subject, their understanding of the material, and perceptions of classmates and instructors, finding evidence of contagious effects of flow combined with social validation among the students.

A theme of Pink's (2009) book *Drive* is that powerful motivation is intrinsic and self-directed. Participating in creating goals results in activity that becomes its own reward. Meeting challenges and learning lead to high productivity and satisfaction (Pink, 2009). Similarly, Bernstein (2016) reported that organizations can benefit from aspects of self-management, especially in environments that require high adaptability.

### **Progress Through the Project**

The 14 week semester with 22 Monday and Thursday class meetings was divided at the midpoint by the spring break. The first half of the semester consisted of activities to get organized and produce the initial results: the electronic draft of the book. Students wanted to work on their tasks during the spring break. Following the break the students intensified their pace to generate the book contents, refine their writing, and make final decisions about the end product. At 3.5 weeks before the end of the class the professor communicated with the Editing team, specifying the date when everything needed to be completed and pointing out the need for a path to glide the project to conclusion. Approximately 70% of the work for the course was completed outside of class time.

During the semester each team gave three scheduled presentations to discuss issues and crossroads. Class presentations by teams kept members updated and were used to collect input and make decisions. For example: The Graphics team presented two alternate book covers: One choice showed an image with religious overtones. The class voted to choose the second choice, a photo of the ocean and sky-blue horizon with the title and subtitle of the book superimposed. The consensus of the class was that this cover had universal appeal.

By the time the project approached the end point, a student-to-student expectation was in force. Students helped each other. Each team of five was accountable to each other and to the other teams. The Editing team communicated the urgency to the students to wrap up their work and designated the steps to conclude the project. All students experienced mutual accountability. The e-book was collectively theirs. Their pride of ownership provided the final momentum.

## **RESULTS AND REFLECTIONS**

The class project to write and produce the e-book moved forward with minimal apparent problems and few adjustments in the project's scope and process.

### **The Completed Book**

The professor had established the necessary framework. Checks and balances had been put in place. Each team had managed its own team members. The class was self-managed, or

team-managed, resulting in the students doing an exemplary job of setting due dates, etc. for themselves. The professor received progress updates from the Editing team. No external resources were needed.

Three changes were observed after the project reached the 60% completion point:

- The lines between the teams increasingly blurred. The teams had grown closer to each other, primarily to share approaches they needed to complete their work. Class members shared ideas among each other freely and involved themselves in each other's tasks, helping out as needed (see Figure 3, Appendix).
- As the project progressed it became apparent that the Editing team was becoming dominant, although the class as a whole retained its leaderless class structure.
- The distribution of effort among class members became concentrated. Six out of the 25 did 80% of the work, or roughly 25%. The highest contributors were on the Editing team.

The Editing team was in frequent communication with the class. All written text was sent to the Editing team and accessed in Google Docs. Alerts were sent when deadlines were coming up or were missed.

The students empirically and academically proved the power of the leaderless team to produce outstanding results. On the last day of class, the Editing team surprised the class by distributing the completed, bound book to each student. In accordance with the leaderless team concept, the instructor had not seen the book nor its contents until it was handed to him. After the books were distributed the students stood and read the dedication, which was to their professor.

### **Leaderless Team Process**

In applying the leaderless class approach, the professor defined the strategy and framework. Although each team applied the leaderless concept according to its preferences, the teams were effective due to several characteristics (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006; Huang & Gellman, 2016; Moore, 2014):

- The small size of the teams encouraged agility.
- Autonomy gave teams control over their decision making.
- Self-organization afforded efficiency to get the work done.
- Teams adjusted to the needs of other members.
- The teams executed according to their own direction.
- Work proceeded on a fast pace.
- Teams knew how to benefit from technology and how to use digital forms of communication.
- Motivational readings reinforced the inherent motivation of each student.

The e-book teams reflected these characteristics and met the requirements for high achievement. Today's teams need to be hungry, humble, and smart, as concluded from research by Lencioni (2016). The author also emphasized the importance of vulnerability, trust, conflict, commitment, accountability, and focus on results.



## Process Management Guidelines

The right conditions helped the students produce results with ease, leading to meeting and exceeding the goal. An overriding guideline concerns the nature of the coursework: It needs to serve the self-needs and self-interests of millennials.

A number of guidelines were applied to adapt to the millennials' values and preferences. Culled from studies (IEAB, n.d.; Moore, 2014; Mortensen, 2016; Sull & Spinosa, 2016) as well as from interactions with students, teaching experience, and analysis of student input on the post-course evaluation, the following factors can provide guidance to professors in adopting the leaderless classroom environment:

- Be clear about the work to be accomplished: why, challenges, expectations.
- Give autonomy to self-organize and self-manage.
- Be personally and professionally respectful.
- Be open, available, and caring.
- Provide needed resources.
- Encourage group work and interactivity.
- Be truthful, ethical, and authentic.
- Tie to the purpose of the class, beyond just getting credit.
- Stay true to values and be humble.
- Work for the success of the students.
- Listen carefully; appreciate counterintuitive ideas.
- Resist the temptation to suggest change.
- Trust the process, even though this may be difficult.

## COURSE ASSESSMENT

### Grading

The determination of a final grade for each student was heavily weighted on the end-of-course presentations given by each team. The emphasis of the presentations focused on what the students learned and how they expected their experience in the class to help them move ahead. Distribution of the grades was: A = 5, A- = 5, B+ = 10, and B = 5. The grading was perceived as very fair, and no student requested an adjustment in a grade.

### Ratings from Course-End Evaluation Survey

The course-end evaluation survey administered by the Seaver College Business Division confirmed that students had a positive experience in the course (see Table 2, Appendix). The highest-rated factors, at 4.67, 4.57, and 4.48 on a 5-point scale, were respectively

- contributed to values and moral integrity;
- enhanced my ability to think critically;
- excellent course.

These ratings relate to the impact the course had on students; specifically, ways the course experience changed them and contributed to their development. The next highest rating concerned knowledge gained (4.43) following by four administrative factors ranging from the

high of 4.43 down to 4.20. At the bottom of the 9 ratings, at 3.19, was “demanding course related to others.” Interpreting this score is speculative; plausible influences are user-friendliness, social interactions on teams, and autonomy to “do it our way.”

The course helped the students develop personal insights more than it helped them master academic subject matter. They reported the course stimulated them to think about how they felt concerning attributes related to leadership, service, and purpose. This different challenge indicates potential for the leaderless classroom pedagogy to integrate academic content with individual development through team application of other academic subject areas. In reflecting on the experience, the professor observed that the course learning process was productive, meaningful, and respectful of the students’ time and energy, while also engaging their interests.

### Comments from Students

Following are representative excerpts from the anonymous post-course survey:

- This was unlike any course I had taken...
- Once it was completed, the time and effort were worth it.
- Loved the class for its unorthodox approach to learning.
- Favorite class this semester.
- The parts met the whole in this class.
- We discovered more about ourselves.
- Made me think about how I feel about certain subjects.
- [The instructor] wanted to go beyond the curriculum and teach us life lessons.
- I have been able to think clearly and logically about my career path

Specific to the professor, students felt he genuinely cared about them and wanted to prepare them for their future lives. Representative comments were:

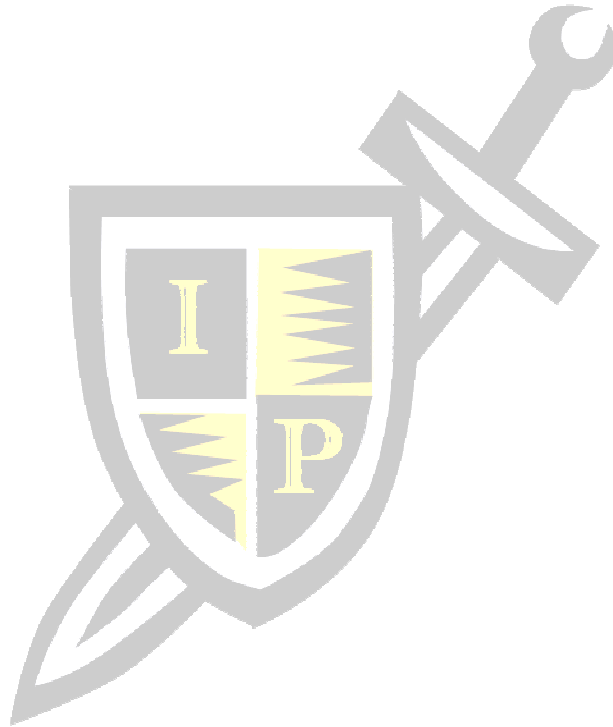
- genuinely cares about his students’ wellbeing.
- he teaches in a way that sticks.
- He makes an effort to ensure that we do not just learn ‘text book’ material, but that we learn skills that will truly help us within the professional arena.

### CONCLUSION

Will authoring and producing an e-book in a leaderless class experience work for another class in another setting? Each leadership class must be customized and adapted to the needs of the students and the style of the professor. Each leaderless class has its own distinct dynamics. A template used in one class cannot be superimposed on another class, expecting each replication to result in quality results. Further, a leaderless class needs a leader with the right combination of knowledge and experience to understand leaderless processes and create the conditions for achievement.

Of the lessons learned from the pilot test described in this article at least two are notable: First, it is essential to understand the process, put it into effect, and trust that it will work. Second, the workload of the teams needs be adjusted throughout the project, which could mean identifying early, middle, and end phase needs and taking up new tasks with each phase to equalize the distribution of work.

In a four-year university, teams in upper division classes have greater probabilities of success because they are older, have gained valuable experience, and have developed self-management skills. Courses that can employ project work are more amenable than courses that focus on acquiring large amounts of information. Online courses involving teams, or virtual teams, could benefit from the leaderless approach as long as team members have opportunities to interact and build trust. Accountability to the team and to the class is a necessary condition to the success of leaderless teams.



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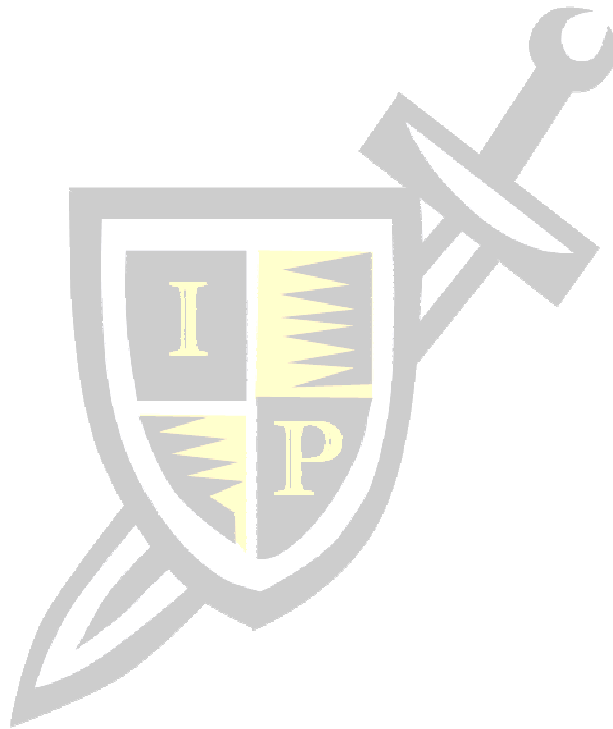
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**APPENDIX**

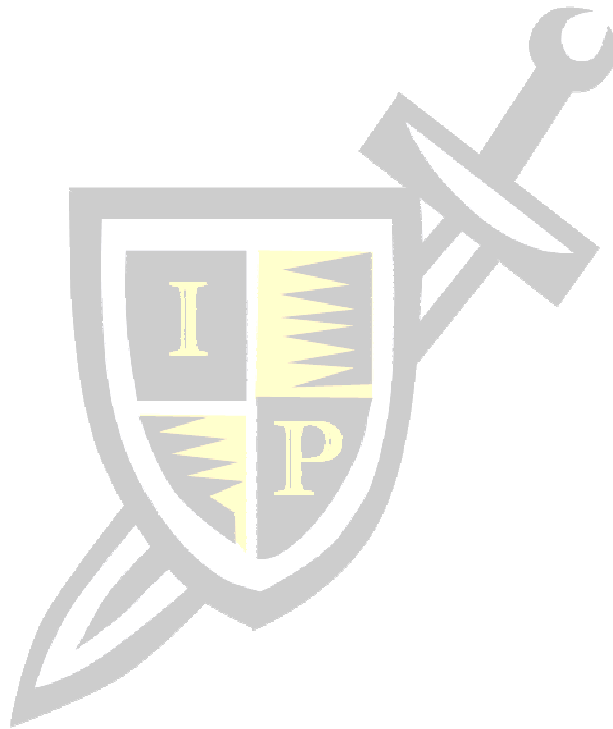
Figure 1 Class Composition Showing Diversity

Table 1 Representative Assigned Reading

Figure 2 Progress by Course Phases

Figure 3 Project Team Interactions, Initially and at End

Table 2 Evaluations by Students



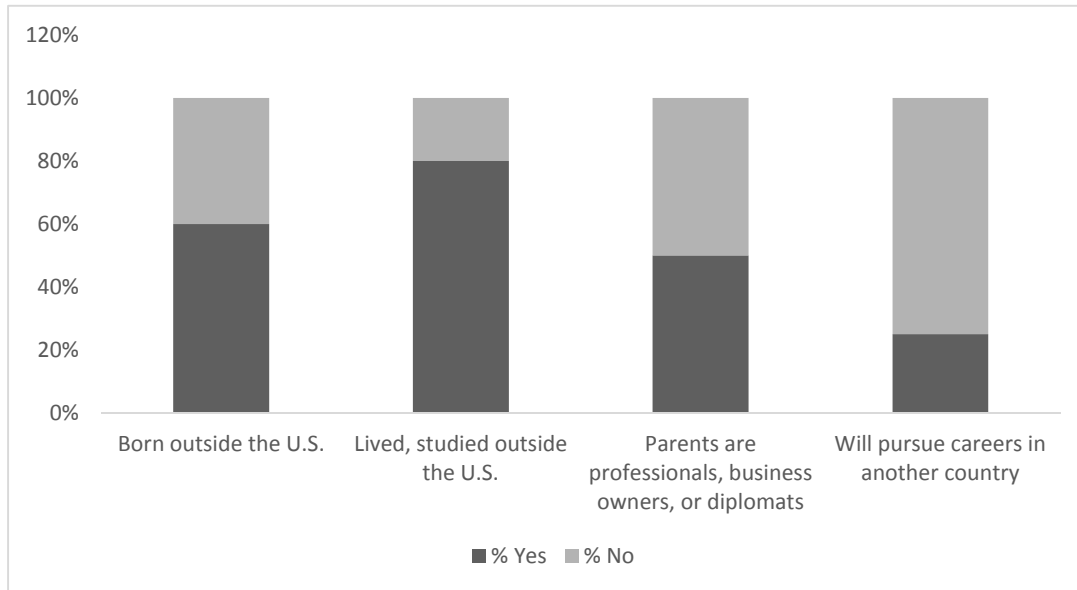


Figure 1. Class composition showing diversity. Based on self-reports of students.

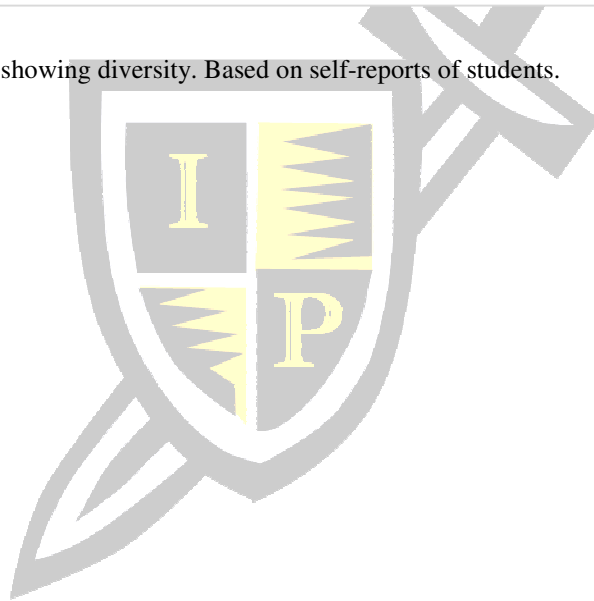
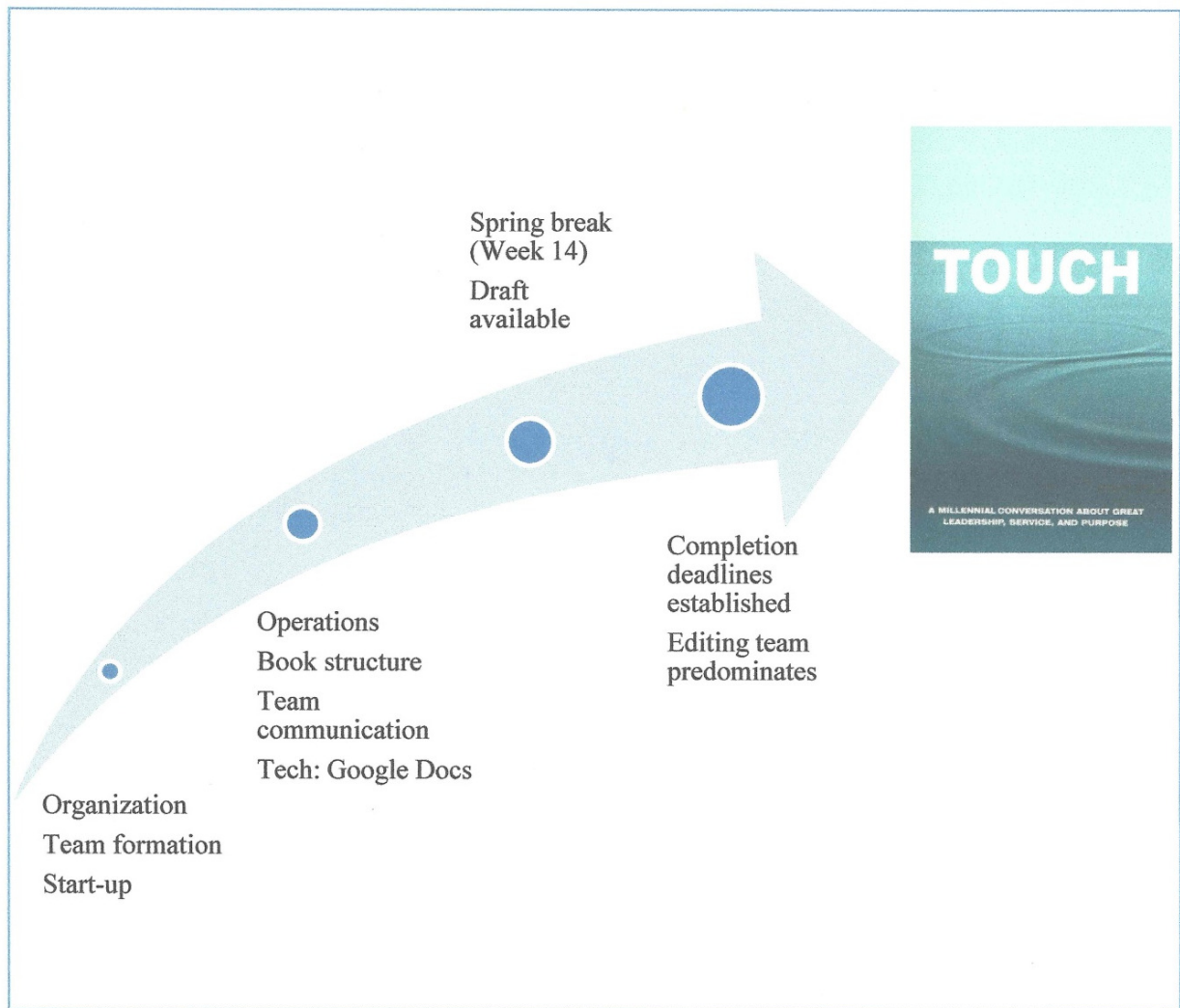


Table 1

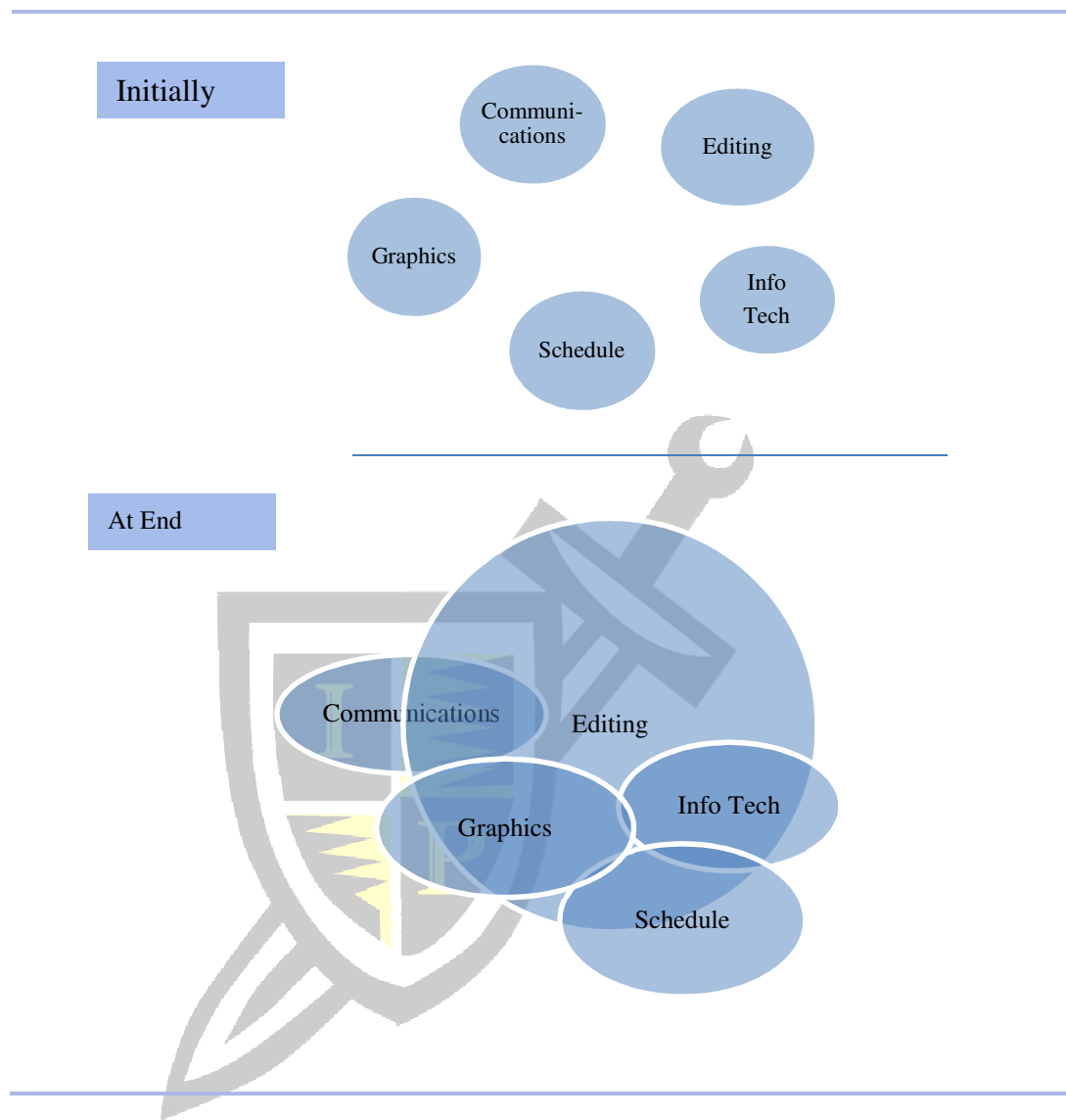
*Representative Assigned Reading*

Theme	Suggested Reading Title	Citation
Organization Structure	The starfish and the spider: The unstoppable power of leaderless organizations	(Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006)
	Start with humility: Lessons from America's quiet CEOs on how to build trust and inspire leaders	(Hayes & Comer, 2010)
	The case for servant leadership	(Keith, 2105)
Leadership	Great by choice: Uncertainty, chaos, and luck—why some thrive despite them all	(Collins & Hansen, 2011)
	Discovering your authentic leadership	(George, Sims, McLean, & Meyer, 2007)
	What makes a leader	(Goleman, 2004)
	Character and servant leadership: Ten characteristics of effective, caring leaders	(Spears, 2010)
Teams	Manage your emotional culture	(Barsade & O'Neil, 2016)
	A diverse team is a creative team [interview of Michael Gregoire]	(Bryant, 2014a)
	Build a culture on trust and respect [interview of Gary Smith]	(Bryant, 2015)
	Why teams don't work	(Coutu, 2009)
	Creating shared value	(Porter, 2011)
Motivation	Don't let the bus run over your dream [interview of Alastair Mitchell]	(Bryant, 2014b)
	The rare find: How great talent stands out	(Anders, 2011)
	In sports or business, always be prepared for the next play [interview of Jeff Weiner]	(Bryant, 2012)
	The NCAA Weekend's biggest winner	(Gay, 2011)
	Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us	(Pink, 2009)
	The Man in the glass	(Wimbrow, 1934)
Millennials	Millennial employees confound big banks	(Huang & Gellman, 2016)
	Authenticity: The way to the Millennial's heart	(Moore, 2014)

Source: Derived from course supplemental reading list.



*Figure 2.* Progress by course phases. Based on team presentations and other communications.



*Figure 3.* Project team interactions, initially and at end. Based on observations of class member behavior patterns.

Table 2

*Evaluations by Students*

Rating Levels	Rating Factors	Mean Score
Highest rated factors	Contributed to values and moral integrity	4.67
	Enhanced my ability to think critically	4.57
	Excellent course	4.48
Next highest	Increased knowledge or understanding	4.43
	Reasonableness and appropriateness of assignments (content and difficulty)	4.43
	Well-organized	4.38
	Appropriateness of text and reading assignments	4.33
	Appropriateness of tests and evaluations	4.20
Lowest	Demanding course compared to others	3.19

Source: Pepperdine University, Seaver College Business Division, Course Evaluation Survey.