# Civic Intelligence 101
## Contribution to GTI Forum The Pedagogy of Transition

### Doug Schuler

*"It isn't a matter of each one teach one. It's a matter of having a concept of education that is yeasty, one that will multiply itself. You have to think in terms of which small groups have the potential to multiply themselves and fundamentally change society."* — Myles Horton

Fifty years ago, I told a fellow University of Washington undergraduate that I needed more interdisciplinary studies. He suggested the newly minted Evergreen State College. I completed my undergraduate degree at Evergreen, taking "Towards Humane Technospheres," which I used in my more than twenty years of activism with Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR), and "Murals and Architectural Art." The instructors, Lucienne Bloch and Stephen Dimitroff, worked with Diego Rivera on the anti-capitalist mural *Man at the Crossroads* for the Rockefeller Center that was destroyed before being seen by the public—but not before Lucienne took the only existing photographs.

After sixteen years at Boeing as an AI Specialist, I started teaching at Evergreen and stayed for twenty-one years. Evergreen is a public liberal arts college that uses written evaluations—no grades, departments, or required classes. Nearly half of its students are identified as low-income. There is a relatively high percentage of veterans and an especially high retention rate for them. Evergreen is intentionally interdisciplinary; it actually encourages professors to teach outside their discipline.

After a while, all my classes contained the term "civic intelligence," *the capacity for people and groups to address significant challenges effectively and equitably.* One of Evergreen's requirements was regular team teaching, and I co-taught with a theater director, philosopher, political scientist,

geographer, a medical doctor, and many others. I retired in spring 2017, the high-water mark of Evergreen's notoriety nationally—and an interesting time to be discussing civic intelligence with students.

There are other important learning objectives besides "mastering subject matter" to think about, including self-efficacy, creativity, courage, social networks, and resources, among others. Self-efficacy is essential; without it, you are stopped before even starting. Some of that means trying to repair damage that has already been done. I will never forget when one student confided that historically school made him "feel stupid," possibly the worst imaginable outcome.

In my classes, I tried to show that people had more agency than they had been led to believe. I encouraged students to focus on both thinking and action, improving the world in some way, and working together purposefully. Thus on a small scale, I was trying to develop "yeasty education," an expression I hadn't known until we read Myles Horton and watched his documentary with Paulo Freire. We also saw documentaries about Samuel Mockbee, community gardens in Los Angeles, fire departments in Detroit, truth and reconciliation commissions in South Africa, citizen deliberation in the EU, and many others. And we read Jane Jacobs, Jürgen Habermas, Jane Addams, John Dewey, Richard Falk, Joseph Tainter, Naomi Klein, and Rebecca Solnit.

I tried to be mindful that students needed to find jobs after graduation, and college was especially critical for our students. Students from my programs went on to work on community health, sustainable Internet hosting, community resilience organizing, veterans counseling, permaculture education, international development, and many others. One of the best advocates for civic intelligence is now commander of a local police department. He told me that he uses civic intelligence to motivate everything he does in that job. One recent graduate is now running for Olympia City Council.

One yeasty moment occurred when a student told me that her mother was "enjoying the class." I was puzzled because her mother wasn't in the class. She explained that every night after class she discussed the day's subjects with her mother.

My approach towards teaching evolved over the years, largely based on student suggestions. Developing antipatterns, going on an annual Activist Road Trip, conducting a homelessness at

Evergreen survey (which was integrated into the Olympia survey), organizing an Olympia Social Forum, and proposing better ways to [rate a college or university](#) were all developed this way.

In my "Social Imagination and Civic Intelligence" class, I decided to also complete my assignment: *Develop a proposal that would encourage civic intelligence at Evergreen*. I proposed the Civic Intelligence Research and Action Lab (CIRAL), an educational venue that would integrate what I had learned about social change, teaching, and the challenges of working on unstructured problems within a structured space and translate that into a project-based learning opportunity that varied from the usual project-based model. Projects are important because they focus on group skills, flexibility in addressing challenges, and broad planning and management skills. I didn't determine what students would work on because it would be more interesting, exciting, and useful for them to develop their own projects. I also know that my imagination and vision of the future is limited.

Evergreen's Undergraduate Research (UGR) option allows students to work with faculty for variable credits. (Many schools have these "escape clauses" that allow alternatives.) Although established for students to work on research defined by faculty members, this worked for CIRAL. I used this every quarter before I retired. And because the one project per set unit of academic time wasn't viable, students could take the UGR option for as many quarters as they wanted.

CIRAL allowed us to organically develop projects that were proposed and directed by the students. My role as the professor was to minimize my instruction and agenda-setting and concentrate on assisting and advising while ensuring that the college was meeting its obligations (e.g., if students wanted to interview students about homelessness, a Human Subjects Review was required).

We kept the ground rules to a minimum. Virtually all were devised collaboratively. All projects would advance civic intelligence and would incorporate research and action. Students would "own" the lab; they'd do much of the managing. It also meant finding students for the lab and planning the future of the lab. The endorsement from at least three students was required to initiate a cluster around a theme of their choosing, and all projects were proposed, developed, and undertaken by clusters. Clusters included Story Works, Home Office, Radical Bliss, Holistic Health at Evergreen, and many others. Some clusters lasted one quarter while others persisted for years and over time would become managed by new people.

The next phase of evolution of Evergreen work was to be CIRAL's institutionalization, with more faculty and student involvement and more institutional support. This didn't happen although Evergreen is now moving that way (and we do have our Facebook group). Even at Evergreen, there was uneasiness from faculty about an excess of student freedom, lack of (their) disciplinary focus, and a feeling that students were unprepared to be involved in the real world.

Several students in preparation for my retirement spent time working to institutionalize CIRAL. They met with deans, talked about CIRAL on the college radio station, and submitted proposals. The idea of propagating CIRALs also came up frequently. The basic model could be used in neighborhoods, cities, and other schools. It could be spread around as-is or it could be modified. Significantly, it could be a basis for a distributed cooperative research and action network.

## About the Author
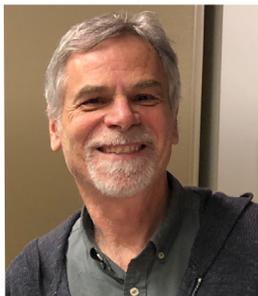
Doug Schuler is the president of the Public Sphere Project, an initiative devoted to the study and promotion of civic intelligence. He is Professor Emeritus at the Evergreen State College and the former chair of Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility. He is co-founder of the Seattle Community Network, a free public access system launched in 1993, and the co-author of *Liberating Voices*. For many years, he has worked on deliberative systems, including e-Liberate, an online system that allows people to conduct distributed meetings using Roberts Rules of Order. He holds an MS in computer science from the University of Washington.

## About the Publication

Published by the Great Transition Initiative.

Cite as Doug Schuler, "Civic Intelligence 101," contribution to GTI Forum "The Pedagogy of Transition," *Great Transition Initiative* (May 2021), https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/pedagogy-transition-schuler.

## About the Great Transition Initiative

The Great Transition Initiative is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.