The Civic Intelligence Research and Action Laboratory

Developing a New Educational Environment at The Evergreen State College

by: Michael O'Neill
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Introduction

The Civic Intelligence Research and Action Laboratory, or CIRAL, is a developing organization within The Evergreen State College that was envisioned by Doug Schuler, a professor there. I was introduced to the concept of civic intelligence and Doug's work during winter quarter of 2011 when I took a program he taught with Steven Beck, Internet: Knowledge and Community. His conception of a group intelligence that could be improved and applied towards strengthening organizations that worked for the public good was directly aligned with my own interests, and I have continued to work with Doug Schuler to further understand his ideas and develop my own work.

A year later, after having completed several independent learning contracts ranging from writing about civic intelligence to my current project organizing a conference in the town where I live to cultivate civic intelligence around the issue of community health, and working with other students in Doug's classes on the topic, I feel that it is very much a part of my own paradigm. When I began Civic Intelligence and Collective Action in the winter quarter of 2012, I was excited to continue the work of developing CIRAL that our small class had started in the fall of 2011. While it was clear to me from previous work that there were many aspects of CIRAL that would need attention for it to really take form, this quarter has provided important real world experience towards understanding how challenging the goals of CIRAL are to build from the ground up.

These goals are to:

- Create a learning environment at The Evergreen State College which engages students in ongoing research and action projects focused on civic intelligence
- Build a living body of knowledge around the work CIRAL is doing that informs future work and contributes to a theory of civic intelligence
- Structure CIRAL so that students take active roles in its leadership and development
- Integrate the academic environment of Evergreen with the broader community of Olympia and beyond through partnerships with CIRAL
- Help students participating in this work build the skills necessary to become active and engaged citizens

The Civic Intelligence Research and Action Laboratory is very much in its infancy. Much of the work done in fall quarter was around envisioning what CIRAL might look like in practice. While some tangible ideas did emerge, there were far too many design elements for students just learning about civic intelligence to create a working model. Perhaps this was the impetus for students in winter quarter to focus on developing research and action projects as a way to start doing CIRAL and hope the structure would follow.

To some extent this was a successful approach. Some projects were initiated by students that would span multiple quarters. However, the lack of organizational development for CIRAL left several students, including myself, floundering and confused at times. From my perspective, the greatest benefit from this project oriented approach was the ways in which it surfaced needed structural improvements.

Throughout winter quarter I engaged with many students and the faculty to envision ways to meet these structural needs. This paper is an attempt to identify some of the challenges students faced and offer suggestions for the ongoing development of CIRAL. To do this I will first examine the dynamics of student to student interactions and the role of the faculty. This will make up the bulk of evidence I am drawing from for my suggestions for the next steps in CIRAL's evolution.

Student/Student Relationships

One of the key visions for CIRAL is that students will take an active role in its work and its direction. Two patterns from Doug Schuler's book, *Liberating Voices* (2008) inform this, Service Learning and Self-Designed Development. These patterns form a strong basis for the approach taken in winter 2012 that sees students and the communities they choose to serve as the driving force in project development.

However, without an existing framework for these projects to develop in, several elements came into play which affected students' ability to carry out their projects and have confidence in their work. While a few students in the program had been exposed to the ideas of civic intelligence in previous programs with Doug Schuler, most of the students in Civic Intelligence and Collective Action were hearing the term for the first time. Also, while many students had interest and some experience working in the community, little of it was in the function as an organizer or project designer. Finally, the faculty was also charting new territory and unable to draw on previous experience working with students in this format.

As CIRAL becomes established and students participate over several quarters, veteran students will become a tremendous resource to new students entering the Lab. Having multiple voices and perspectives capable of explaining civic intelligence and the work of CIRAL will go a long way towards mitigating the confusion many students experienced winter quarter. This mix of veteran and new students will also strengthen capacity for project work with a greater number of team members having organizational and design skills gained through experience.

The CIRAL student club, envisioned in the fall and formed at the beginning of winter quarter, is an example of this student/student support structure for the work of CIRAL. Two other students from fall and myself met weekly with other students to discuss the class and develop ideas. Our first few meetings were mostly the core group from last quarter. As time went by our meetings grew to include students who were confused or frustrated by their experience in their class work.

In the student club setting these new students had many of their questions answered and were able to become constructive members of our discussions on ways to cultivate civic intelligence through practice. Our discourse was noticeably improved by increased participation, which illustrates the notion of group intelligence benefitting from the collective quality of the group rather than individual knowledge. Another interesting aspect of this student/student interaction was the empowering effect of sharing our experiences from the class with each other.

The isolated task cluster, loose format for project development, and shaky understanding of civic intelligence, were collectively identified as a problem. Because the students had confidence this was a shared challenge, it was able to come up in class. Once these issues were addressed collectively more time was allocated for task clusters, the Home Office gained needed members, a World Cafe was put on in class, and a review of civic intelligence was conducted. Without the empowering effect of the student club, individuals could easily have remained silent about their concerns, fearing they were the only ones that held them.

Student/Faculty Relationships

Realizing the widespread gap in understanding among students certainly draws attention to the faculty's role in supporting the work of CIRAL. Without a full model for CIRAL, the project guidelines and method for forming task clusters was developed without the benefit of experience to inform it. This lack of experience also left faculty without knowledge of the kinds of support each task cluster and individual students would need. With the level of uncertainty from both the faculty and students, communication seemed to break down.

A great deal of this communication barrier likely stems from CIRAL essentially starting from scratch. Even as somewhat of a veteran, I found myself at the start of the quarter unsure of what I should be doing and unable to articulate the support from the faculty I needed. The initial handouts we received describing our project had many possible

avenues of exploration, but understandably, did not clearly lay out a path of development for students to follow. After reviewing this document now I do see a description of the work faculty expected students to complete, but those expectations were not clear to me as I undertook the work.

CIRAL class time was often unfocused. When there was time for task clusters to work together, individual students took the opportunity to engage with the faculty one on one. When we all met together discussion didn't seem to directly support the task cluster projects and rarely engaged the whole group. This lack of structure to direct CIRAL class time and the missing support from faculty during project development are important elements to consider for next quarter and beyond.

One approach to improving faculty/student relationships is to make it more explicitly collaborative. A model for accomplishing this is to set up the Home Office as the primary interface for student/faculty collaboration. All students could give input to the Home Office on their experiences and the challenges they face, which would be synthesized and addressed with the faculty. The faculty could also use the Home Office as a partner for in class workshop design, program material, curriculum design, and CIRAL strategic planning.

A significant increase in student/faculty collaboration would go a long way towards developing CIRAL into an organization that practices civic intelligence as a way to understand it. The World Cafe that was conducted winter quarter is a good example of this approach. It is also illustrates the faculty's openness to new approaches and student collaboration, which is a positive sign for further development.

As I mentioned earlier, the World Cafe came out of a conversation students broached with the faculty after building a shared understanding of the challenges they were facing. Since I had facilitated two previous World Cafes, I volunteered to take on that role. Both John Baldridge and Doug Schuler supported my effort in this and we developed a series of three questions that bridged both their perspective on the scope
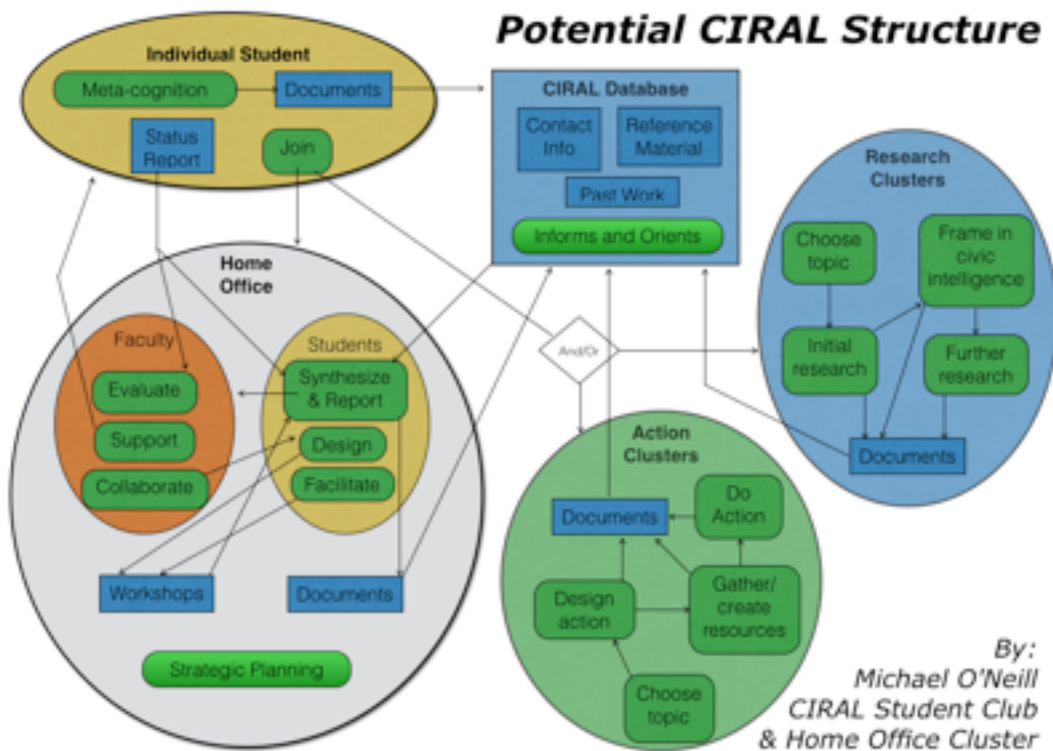
of inquiry and my own sense of the students interest from my conversations in the student club.

The World Cafe format for large group conversations is designed to foster group intelligence. Students engaging each other in this way had many positive results in both the exploration of the questions and increased understanding through practice. Because it was designed in response to students needs and informed by them, with the direction of the faculty, everyone involved both created and received benefit from it.

Next Steps For Developing CIRAL

The overwhelmingly positive feedback around the World Cafe shows the power of practicing forms of civic intelligence as a way to understand it. The more that class activities and assignments can become practices of civic intelligence, CIRAL will increase its capacity to achieve its goals. A working model for this is shown below.

Potential CIRAL Structure

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CIRAL Student Club
& Home Office Cluster

This model envisions faculty and students as co-creators of CIRAL work through the Home Office. Feedback from individual students on their current work and challenges they are facing is regularly analyzed by the faculty for evaluation. But, it is also analyzed by students in the home office to identify themes that can be brought out. Through discussion with the faculty and collaborative design, elements of CIRAL can be adjusted and strengthened to better meet student needs.

A central component of a more civicly intelligent CIRAL is a database that students' work feeds into. Improving the documentation process for all phases of student work will be instrumental in building this database. From this information methodology can be developed for successful ways to develop research and action projects and frame them in the context of civic intelligence.

Another element to the development of CIRAL that has come out of numerous discussions, is the importance of scope and sequencing. One of the goals of CIRAL is to establish lasting partnerships with outside organizations to engage in ongoing work in the community. Unfortunately, CIRAL does not have the capacity to do this yet.

For CIRAL to poses the resources that would make it an attractive partner, it must first develop a praxis of the ways in which it could benefit outside organizations and strengthen civic intelligence. This is not to say CIRAL should have no contact with outside organizations at this point. Channeling interns through the CCBLA at Evergreen who would also collect information about those organizations to feed into the CIRAL database is an option rich in potential.

The main point is that developing a working theory and practice of civic intelligence that can make an impact in the community must start at a smaller scale. A progression that made sense to John Baldridge's seminar group was Classroom -> Campus -> Community -> Continent. This type of nested expansion allows praxis to evolve over time and test its self before moving on to a larger scope and scale than it is ready for.

As the CIRAL classroom is developed into a model of civically intelligent practices it can reach out to the Evergreen campus. Once CIRAL is integrated with the campus a much broader base of students and faculty will be able to step into the community arena to develop partnerships that can create lasting change. Success in Olympia could spark national or global interest, by which time CIRAL will have a well developed knowledge base and the experience to take on even more complex challenges.

This does not have to be a didactic model for the growth of CIRAL. The only point is that building capacity is the key to broadening CIRAL's scope. Students could engage in internships, as mentioned above, even before CIRAL begins to expand to the campus. Partnerships with the community don't need the fine arts, hard sciences, CIS students, and the whole of evergreen integrated with CIRAL to be effective. However CIRAL would have much greater ability to help organizations address the multitude of challenges they face in the real world if Evergreen was an institution that supported the work of CIRAL with all of its resources.

The SEED-SCALE model developed in *Just and Lasting Change*, Self-Evaluation for Effective Decision-making, and Systems for Communities to Adapt Learning and Expand, seems very much in line with the goals of CIRAL. The way in which it starts with assessment of local communities and creates partnerships between experts, government, and the communities, to first create small but noticeable success before expanding, gives support to the nested spheres of expansion for CIRAL (Taylor-Ide & Taylor, 2002). In fact the model presented in *Just and Lasting Change* is so full of practical means for increasing civic intelligence and real world examples of the method at work, it is well worth considering as a future text for CIRAL.

In addition to structuring CIRAL to become an example of civic intelligence, and approaching its growth through nested expansion, improving student meta-cognition is vital to its development. In an article by Marie Eaton and Judith Patton, the authors present several ideas for engaging students in reflective thinking through writing (2003).

The idea of CIRAL students keeping a journal was proposed in fall 2011, which pairs nicely with this article.

Because CIRAL is breaking new ground in collaborative education and developing the theory and practice of civic intelligence, a tool to improve students ability to do analysis on their experiences will greatly improve their ability to move the work forward. This type of meta-cognition will be essential in identifying the key elements of CIRAL's work that make an effective practice of civic intelligence. Increased student meta-cognition will also be vital to the development of the CIRAL database.

Another tool to strengthen CIRAL is Doug Schuler's *Liberating Voices* pattern language. His notion that:

> *"Pattern languages seem to be appropriate in the development of bodies of knowledge that differ from traditional paradigmatic bodies of knowledge. The idea of using a pattern language as the ongoing focus for the thematic orientation for interdisciplinary work in high school or college or beyond is appealing..."*

seems a sound basis for incorporating *Liberating Voices* fully into the work of CIRAL (Schuler 2008). Several students throughout the quarter commented on its usefulness in aiding their own understanding of civic intelligence and wished it had been a bigger part of the program.

Conclusion

The challenges faced in winter quarter of Civic Intelligence and Collective action and the steps to overcome them have provided a lot to consider for the development of CIRAL. While the process created many unforeseen difficulties, many explicit examples of needed change have already been developed into plans for next quarter and beyond. The ultimate success of the Civic Intelligence Research and Action Laboratory will ultimately depend on how much it is able to practice what it preaches.

As a student who experienced all of this first hand, I can say that any frustrations I've experienced have been overshadowed by the growth that has come out of them. The potential of what CIRAL is becoming is inspiring. To be a part of its development is not only rewarding, it is an educational experience that could not be replicated in any other environment.

Refrences

Eaton, M., & Patton, J. (2003). *Reflection, Civic Engagement, and Learning Communities. National Learning Communities Project Monograph Series, Integrating Learning Communities with Service-Learning*, 75-88.

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