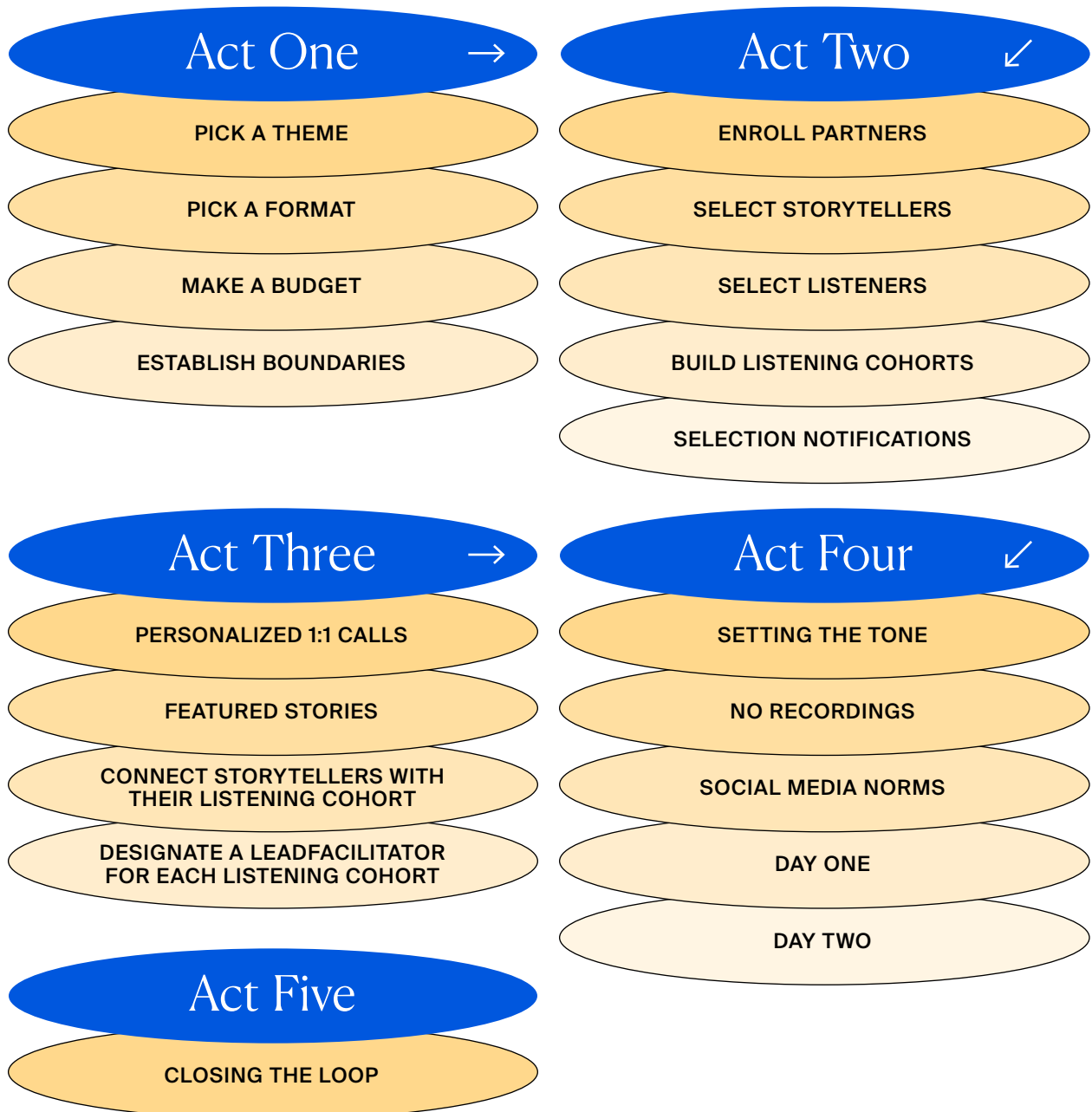# 14

Epilogue |
How to
Organize
a Storytelling
Workshop

Rigoberto Lara Guzmán
and Ranjit Singh

This primer on organizing global, online storytelling workshops is not a prescription; it is intended as a remembering of processes, intentions, and lessons we learned as curators. Readers may infuse these parameters with their own creativity and purpose. May it be of use to fellow organizers building strong listening cohorts and rhizomatic research communities online.

Act One →

PICK A THEME

PICK A FORMAT

MAKE A BUDGET

ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES

Act Two ↙

ENROLL PARTNERS

SELECT STORYTELLERS

SELECT LISTENERS

BUILD LISTENING COHORTS

SELECTION NOTIFICATIONS

Act Three →

PERSONALIZED 1:1 CALLS

FEATURED STORIES

CONNECT STORYTELLERS WITH THEIR LISTENING COHORT

DESIGNATE A LEADFACILITATOR FOR EACH LISTENING COHORT

Act Four ↙

SETTING THE TONE

NO RECORDINGS

SOCIAL MEDIA NORMS

DAY ONE

DAY TWO

Act Five

CLOSING THE LOOP

Act One:
Set up a call for participation

PICK A THEME
A broad theme can accommodate multiple particularities.
A particular theme can be broad in scope.

PICK A FORMAT
The format will shape how the workshop is designed.
Be clear on the storytelling format you seek
before soliciting submissions.

MAKE A BUDGET
Figure out an estimate of what the workshop will cost,
always accounting for adequate compensation of time and labor.
Budgets can serve as excellent planning tools to shape
what is possible.

ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES
Apart from clarifying the theme and format, writing the call
for submissions also clarifies expectations between organizers.
Start early on writing this call; it is a wonderful device to build
consensus and trust. Give two to three months between
distributing the call and the submission deadline.

We organized the call around the following questions:

→ How long will the workshop be?
→ What will happen during the workshop?
→ Who are the audiences we want to engage?
→ What are the key dates and milestones in the project timeline?
→ What kind of commitment is expected for each role (storytellers and listeners)?

Our selection criteria was based on the following factors:

→ *Empirical foundation.* Is the story fictional/speculative or based on lived experience?
→ *Narrative structure.* Stories have a clear beginning, middle, and end, but not necessarily in that order.
→ *Conceptual integrity.* Potential for the story to contribute to theoretical/conceptual understanding of living with data and automated technologies in a global context.
→ *Modalities of critique.* Discerning knowledge and critique from the interplay of everyday experience and sociotechnical systems.
→ *Differential vulnerability.* Attention and understanding to the making and management of difference through data and AI.

Act Two:
Processing Submissions

ENROLL PARTNERS

Organize a community peer review group of trusted advisors. Treat peer reviewers as partners in organizing the workshop and credit accordingly. Clearly describe the expectations from the partnership. We listed the following:

→ Participate in the workshop.
→ Review a select batch of submissions.
→ Distribute the call within their networks.
→ Nominate a story to be featured in the workshop. This enables partners to directly shape the event.
→ Provide an honorarium (if possible and if they chose to accept it).

SELECT STORYTELLERS

Think about all the stories together as a featured set. We included the following additional factors to consider:

→ *Intersectionality.* Does the collection reflect critical awareness of differential vulnerability based on race, caste, class, gender, and ability?
→ *Geography/Domain.* How are the stories situated? Does the collection represent a balanced spectrum in terms of geographies and domains?
→ *Harms and Redress.* What forms of harms and corresponding redress strategies for living with data and AI does the collection highlight?
→ *Sector/Discipline.* Do the storytellers represent a balanced mix of career stages and affiliations across academia, industry, and practice?

SELECT LISTENERS

Create a list of factors to decide whether a participant might be a good listener. We thought a lot about the featured stories in selecting listeners. Our list of concerns around whether a listener would be a good fit was:

→ *Ability to engage with the storyteller.* Can the listener provide good feedback to the storyteller based on field relevance and subject matter expertise?

→ *Positionality and interests.* Does the listener provide a unique perspective on the content and/or the form of the story; would they be a good match?

BUILD LISTENING COHORTS

Think about listeners as members of a cohort that will work with the storyteller. We considered the following factors in building cohorts:

→ *Composition of the cohort.* Is the cohort diverse in terms of a mix of career stages, research interests, and affiliations across academia, industry, and practice?

→ *Collective expertise.* Is the cohort collectively well-positioned to provide feedback on different aspects of the story? Sometimes this can be expertise in the story's topic or its geographic context, on others this can be about expertise in storytelling styles such as journalistic or visual.

SELECTION NOTIFICATIONS

Explain the role of the participant and clarify expectations when notifying them of their selection.

Note on Timeline:
We processed hundreds of submissions in the span of two weeks. Noting the significant pressure of meeting deadlines in our case, we recommend at least a month's gap (if not more) between submission deadline and selection notifications.

Act Three:
Before The Workshop

PERSONALIZED 1:1 CALLS
We provided storytellers with an option to meet with us for
a one hour video call before submitting their draft. This is a lot
of work, but it turned out to be crucial in making storytellers
feel at ease about their story.

FEATURED STORIES
Workshops are great for elaborating on a research object together.
For a storytelling workshop, this object is the draft of a story. In
requesting drafts for stories, we had the following considerations:

→ *Timeline.* Storytellers must be given at least three weeks
   (preferably a month) to submit a draft after selection
   notification.
→ *Format.* We asked for a written version (<3,000 words)
   and an audio recording of the story (<10 minutes),
   with the caveat that these limits were only indicative and
   we would be open to longer or shorter stories.

CONNECT STORYTELLERS WITH THEIR LISTENING COHORT
In organizing a global online event, expect that gathering people
across multiple time zones will be difficult. We connected listeners to
storytellers about two weeks in advance and offered a set of options
to facilitate interaction between the storyteller and the cohort:

→ *Fixed session.* Designate a feedback session on the first
   day of the workshop, where the cohort is expected to
   meet with the storyteller.

→ *Option to meet at any time starting a week before the workshop.* Listeners should be afforded some time to engage with the story draft before a feedback session can be organized. We gave listeners a week before this option was explored between the storyteller and their cohort members.

→ *(If meeting isn't possible at all) Option to provide feedback online.* We organized this option by providing listeners the choice of either commenting on shared documents or interacting in a private online chat group via Discord, which only included the storyteller and the listening cohort.

DESIGNATE A LEAD FACILITATOR FOR EACH LISTENING COHORT
Seeding conversations is hard. Having a person designated to do it can be generative for the feedback session. It can also help with coordinating logistics of when to meet based on the cohort's constraints. We learned that:

→ Event partners are good choices for lead facilitators, but they have already done a lot of work for the event. Respecting their capacity is crucial.

→ Lead facilitators take on this role in different ways. Some prepared feedback documents, others prefer a more active role in mediating group discussions.

Act Four:
During The Workshop

SETTING THE TONE
A workshop is an event and every event needs moments of gathering.
One such moment can be organized through a traditional keynote
address, which can also serve the purpose of setting the tone for the
duration of the workshop.

NO RECORDINGS
Workshops are organized around unfinished pieces of work.
To provide a safer space for sharing works-in-progress,
we recommend not recording any session during the workshop
and keeping its proceedings private.

SOCIAL MEDIA NORMS
To ensure that participants can still share their workshop experience,
the community adhered to the following norms:

→ To protect confidentiality, participants were requested
to focus on the broad topic of stories and their personal
reactions to it rather than specific details of what
was being said.
→ Organizers can consider providing a hashtag that can be
used collectively so that participants can also follow
what others are writing about.

DAY ONE

Opening session. The keynote address to set the tone and prepare,
facilitate, and lead participants through a knowledge share or
conversation on the workshop theme. (~75 minutes)

Feedback session for storytellers. A listening session for the storytellers to receive live feedback on the drafts of their stories. (~75 minutes)

Short break and meet and greet chats between these two sessions. (~15 minutes)

DAY TWO

Story slam. A listening session for all participants to listen to all the featured stories. (~ten minutes per featured storyteller with two breaks after five stories)

Since their stories were in the making, the story slam was not recorded. This choice also made it a safe space for sharing stories between the storytellers and the workshop's broader community of listeners.

The feedback we received was that, although the experience of listening to live stories is rich, the session ended up being too long and emotionally exhausting. Consider a lesser number of storytellers or breaking up the story slam over a couple of days, when the listening cohorts could be different depending on capacity and availability.

Act Five:
After The Workshop

CLOSING THE LOOP

The gathering does not close at the end of the workshop. The workshop will initiate several relationships between the storytellers and their listening cohorts, between workshop participants, and finally, between the organizers and the community they brought together. Since the workshop itself was focused on stories-in-progress, finding a way to keep tabs on when and where they are published or helping them get published is a way to effectively close the loop.

Maintain a webpage for the workshop. With the hope that most stories featured in the workshop will take a published form in the future, this webpage can offer a way to store memory for the community.

Organizers can also reimagine their roles as editors of an anthology. Producing an edited volume with contributions from several authors can take years. The workshop cuts short some of the initial work of soliciting works-in-progress, and offers a way for the organizers and the storytellers to continue to work together towards publishing an anthology.

Divergences in commitment. The workshop can also be a natural end point of engagement for some storytellers, given their own capacity. No matter how a relationship unfolds, ending it in a space of mutual respect and understanding is crucial to how the workshop will be remembered and its impact on the community that participated.