PNI Practicum I: Smaller-scale PNI
Activities

Part 1: Introduction, Fundamentals, Planning

1a. Observe a story-sharing conversation

Before the conversation

Ask at least two friends, colleagues, or family members (people who are not taking the course with you) to chat. *Don't tell them you plan to listen to stories*. But do ask them if you can record or take notes on the conversation for a course you are taking.

Recording is better if you can do it. If you can't record, take as many notes as you can (while still participating in the conversation).

Observe the conversation for at least fifteen minutes.

During the conversation

As you talk, slide a story-eliciting question (a request for a story abstract) into the conversation. For example, you might say something like, "So, what's up with your cat? What happened at the vet?" or something. See if you can *invite someone to tell you a story*. Notice how they respond. If they don't respond by telling a story, keep tweaking your invitation until it works. Do this a few times.

When somebody does tell a story, encourage them to continue. Then respond to the story with a related story of your own. See if you can get a chain of stories going.

After the conversation

Listen to your recording or look over your notes. Think about the negotiations that took place during the conversation. Open your course log and find this activity in it. Answer the questions you find there.

If you don't have time

You can skip this first activity if you want to (or have to). It will not affect the success of your project (beyond helping you understand how stories work in conversation). Hopefully some of your fellow students will have done the activity, and you can listen as they describe their observations.

Stretch challenges

If you want to do more with this activity, consider these ideas:

- Listen to a few **different conversations** in different contexts, then compare what you hear. Listen at work and at home, for example, or at the market and at the library, or during a meeting and during a party. Do you notice different styles of story sharing? What do those styles tell you about those contexts?
- Open *Working with Stories* (not the *Simplified* version), go to chapter 5 ("Stories in Communities and Organizations"), and find the section called "**Assessing Story Sharing**."

Answer the questions you see there, as best you can, for each context in which you observed conversational story sharing. What does that tell you about each context?

Part 2: Collection I

2a. Answer some questions about your participants

Open your course log and find this activity in it. Answer the questions you find there.

If you don't have time

Just look at the questions and think about them, without writing anything down. Even five minutes of pondering the questions will be helpful to you.

Stretch challenges

If you want to think about your project participants even more, consider these options.

- Once you have finished answering these questions, **ask some of the participants** in each group what they think of your answers. Where do they think you have them right, and where do they think you have misunderstood them? Can you improve your answers?
- Ask some participants in each group to review your answers to the questions **about the people in the other groups**. Is it possible to improve your answers to the point where everyone in every group can be expected to agree? If it's not possible, what does *that* look like? What is the landscape of perception among the groups of people you will be including in your project? Are there broad areas of agreement? Are there immovable disagreements? What does that mean about how you should plan your project?
- Ask some people from each group to choose a few aspects of the questions that they would like to join you in working on. Can you use these questions about participant groups to **get a sense of the potential energy** that might be available within each group to drive change? And can you design a project that draws on that energy to engage and empower everyone?

2b. Tell project stories

First, open your course log and find this activity in it.

Next, choose one of four magical **scenarios**.

1. **Ask me anything**. If you could ask people *any* question, and they would have to answer it honestly and completely, what question would you ask? For example, you might say, "I wish I could ask people what they *really* think about our business plan."
2. **Magic ears**. If you could *overhear* any conversation, without anyone knowing you were listening, what conversation would you like to hear? For example, you might say, "I wish I could overhear two of my neighbors talking about our plans for our new library."

3. **Fly on the wall**. If you could watch *any event* take place, what would you like to see? For example, you might say, "I wish I could watch people's faces as they encounter our new employee policy for the first time."
4. **Something about your project**. This one's a little different. Instead of a what-if story, it's a because-of story. Choose a specific aspect of your project plans, something that matters to you, and prepare to tell a story about how that aspect affected the project. For example, you might say, "I would like to explore how my plan to bring young and old people together will play out in my project."

After you have chosen a scenario, choose an **outcome** for the story.

- Colossal success – your project succeeds beyond your wildest dreams
- Miserable failure – your project ends in disaster
- Acceptable outcome – your project comes out fine, though it could have been better

Now combine the two elements (scenario and outcome) into a story. For example, you might say, "I asked people what they *really* thought about our business plan, and it was a disaster; I learned nothing at all." Tell the story, out loud or in writing.

In your course log, answer the questions about your first story.

Do this three times, choosing different scenarios and outcomes each time.

If you don't have time

Don't write anything down. Just look over the scenarios and outcomes and wait for a few stories to come to mind. Even five minutes pondering the building blocks of some project stories will be helpful to you.

Stretch challenges

If you want to do more with this activity, **bring some of your participants into it** with you. Briefly explain to some people from each participant group what you plan to do. Then show them the scenarios and outcomes for this activity and ask them what springs to mind. Challenge yourself to be surprised, even if unpleasantly, by what people have to say. Use it as a test of your plans.

If people tell you that *nothing* springs to mind for them, that's even more useful information. It means that your explanation of your plan has not sufficiently connected to them to conjure up any stories in their minds. You might be thinking of the project too much from your own point of view and too little from theirs. What can you say about the project that will help every participant envision themselves playing a part in it?

2c. Answer the PNI Planning Questions

Open your course log and find this activity in it. Answer the questions you find there.

If you don't have time

Don't put aside this activity. It is imperative to give at least quick answers to the six questions posed in this activity. Even if you can spend only five minutes doing this task, don't leave it out.

Stretch challenges

You can get some feedback on this plan from some of your participants. And you can go even further by asking some participants to help you improve the plan in a shared editing session.

Another extra step is to **challenge your answers** to the PNI planning questions by asking yourself some provoking questions about them. After you have written your answers (and maybe gotten some feedback or help improving them), ask yourself:

- Is this answer **certain**? Are we sure this is what we want? Are we sure this is the best plan? Or is this aspect of the project somewhat of an experiment?
- **Why** did we answer this question the way we did? What lies behind this answer? What forces or historical factors have shaped it? Is it rational, emotional, or a mix? What is its source of energy, positive and/or negative?
- Is this answer **contentious**? How much agreement is there among people in our community or organization that this project (or any project) should be designed in this way? If there is disagreement, how does our answer to the question take that into consideration?
- Is this answer **realistic**? Are we indulging in wishful thinking? Can we really expect this to happen? Should we scale back our expectations here?
- What **new stories** does this answer bring to mind? If this project succeeded (or failed) because this decision was correct (or horribly mistaken), what would that look like?

2d. Build your privacy policy

Open your course log and find this activity in it. Answer the questions you find there.

If you don't have time

This is the most important activity in this part of the course. It's even more important than the PNI planning questions. **If you can only do one thing in this part of the course, do this**. It need not take long, but *you must have something to say to your participants* about what you will do with what they say to you. If you do not address the legitimate privacy concerns of your project participants, you will not collect stories that will be useful for sensemaking. You will still collect stories! But you will collect guarded, superficial stories, and those are not useful for sensemaking.

Stretch challenges

The best thing you can do with your privacy policy is to **ask your participants to help you build it**. Write a first draft, then show it to some people from every participant group and ask them to help you improve it. Keep working until everyone you talk to (in every group) not only *says* they are comfortable with the agreement but also *seems* comfortable with it (in their expressions and body language). Don't just look for consent: look for enthusiasm.

Once you are sure that your privacy policy will be acceptable to your participants, work to make it brief (not demanding), simple (not condescending or intimidating, no jargon), reassuring (giving them permission to safely explore), and empathetic (showing that you understand their

perspectives). Your goal is to set every participant at ease so they can apply their unimpeded energy to the important task of working together.

2e. Prepare to describe your project plans

You will only have five minutes to talk during the meeting, so don't overdo this activity. Just get ready to explain what you plan to do in your project.

If you don't have time

If you have done all (or some) of the other activities for this part of the course, you can literally just show your fellow students what you have done so far. You don't need to spend any time preparing a presentation. Just **show up and show your work**, even if it's messy. The point is not to wow everyone with your amazing plans. It's just to get some feedback and support before you start gathering stories.

Stretch challenges

If you want to get the most you can out of this activity, prepare a serious, polished presentation, as though you really were going up in front of people who will decide whether your project will or won't happen – because you need permission or funding, or because if nobody steps up to participate, you won't gather enough stories to make sense of. Consider some reactions you might get and think about how you should respond to them.

Part 3: Collection II

3a. Choose and adapt a story form

Open the *Working with Stories Sourcebook* and choose a story form to use in your project. Then adapt the story form you chose to your unique project.

1. At the start of your form, add 1-2 of the common questions listed at the start of the story form library. Choose which common questions fit your project best.
2. Look through the questions in the form you chose. You can add, remove, rephrase, or replace any of the questions.
3. If you want to, "go shopping" through the whole book, looking at all of the questions in all of the forms. See if there are any questions you like better than the ones you have now. Just keep in mind the cognitive budget (time, attention, and interest) of your participants.
4. In many questions you will see words in {curly brackets}, such as "{the topic}" or "{your community}" or "{a list of outcomes}". Replace those words with words that apply to your specific project.
5. Every set of answers that specifies "a list of" things should also have an "other" option with a write-in answer. You might also want to include the answers "I don't know" or "I'd rather not say" on some questions. (If you give people a way to say *why* they don't want to answer a question, you'll still get some answers, rather than silence.)

6. At the end of your story form, you might want to add some demographic questions about your participants: age, gender, etc. Remember to collect only as much information as you actually need.

Finally, open your course log, find this activity, paste your adapted story form there, and answer the questions.

If you don't have time

This is an important activity. Prioritize it. You can put off gathering your first stories until the next part of the course, but **don't skimp on giving your story form your full attention**. Think carefully about the questions you will ask. If your questions aren't inviting and meaningful to your participants, you won't gather stories you can use in sensemaking, and your whole project will grind to a halt.

Stretch challenges

If you have time, **test your story form** before you use it in your first interview. You can test a story form in any of several ways, as follows. I have arranged these methods in order of increasing utility and difficulty. Do whichever of these things you can with the time and resources you have.

- Let your story form sit for a while (say overnight), then look at it with fresh eyes (say in the morning). **Try not to like it**. Can you see any flaws in it? Ask yourself these questions:
    - Is it **clear** or confusing? Is it consistent in its tone of voice? In its use of tense and person? Is the experience a smooth one? Or does it get stuck on bumps in the road?
    - Is the form **inviting**, or is it demanding? Is it encouraging or intimidating? Is it hopeful and positive, and not in a fake, toxic-positivity way?
    - Does this seem like an **attractive** experience? Is it lively and energizing, or boringly repetitive? Does it provide an interesting reflective experience?
    - Is it **empathetic**? Is it understanding? Does it respect the unique voice and lived experience of each person?
- Think of a person you know who disagrees with you in some way. What would that person say about your story form? Would they tell a story in response to it? If so, what sort of story would they tell? Now think of a few more people who disagree with you in other ways. What would they say?
- Find a person who knows nothing about the project, a neighbor or friend or family member. Say something like, "Could I show you something I've been working on?" Then put the form in front of them *without a word of explanation*. Then watch how they react to it. Are they bored or interested? Do they seem pleased or offended? What is their take on it?
- Finally, put your story form in front of some of your actual or potential project participants and watch their reactions.

3b. Gather stories in an individual interview

Before the interview

Schedule the interview. Find one person who knows about the topic you plan to explore and is willing and able to talk to you about it. Ask them to join you for a 30 to 60 minute interview.

You can meet **in person or online**. It is best to **record** the interview, if you can. If you can't record, prepare to take notes. If you plan to record the interview, get permission from your interviewee beforehand, so there are no surprises when you start.

You can of course do more than one interview. The more practice you get, the more you will learn. But one interview is enough to keep up with the course.

Prepare your introduction. Write up or think through a few minutes of introductory remarks. Briefly explain:

- who you are and who you represent
- what you are doing, why you are doing it, and what you hope to achieve
- what will happen in the interview
- how you will ensure privacy and anonymity (your privacy policy)
- what you will do with the stories you collect and who will see or hear them
- your contact information, in case they want to change or retract what they said
- how they can participate in or find out about the rest of the project

Practice saying your introduction a few times until it sounds natural. When you can start the interview without seeming to read from a script, you are ready.

*In these introductory remarks, **do not mention the word "stories."** Say "experiences." (You will be saying "story" later on, but wait until the person has told at least one story to use the word, so they understand what you mean by it.)*

Prepare your story form. You already should have chosen a story form and adapted it to your project. Before you use it in your first interview, if you haven't tested your form yet, at least practice using it yourself. Pretend to interview yourself. *If a question sounds strange or awkward when you say it out loud, rephrase it until it sounds natural*.

Prepare your plan to ask story elicitation questions. Choose how many story-eliciting questions you want to use.

- If you want to use **just *one* story-eliciting question**, you can just ask it. Have one or two additional questions ready in case the person doesn't respond to the question you chose.
- If you want to use **a *menu* of story-eliciting question**s, decide how you will use it. If you are talking online, you can show it in an email or on a shared screen. If you are talking in person, you can hand your interviewee a sheet of paper with the menu of questions on it. Or you can hand them a "deck" of question cards and ask them to pick one.

Prepare your plan to ask questions about stories and participants. You can have your interviewee answer follow-up questions in one of two ways:

- You can **ask your questions out loud**. You will get the most reflective answers when people are talking directly to you. However, this option takes up a lot of time. You will be able to collect fewer and shorter stories if you use up your time asking questions.
- You can **ask people to fill out a form**, either online or on paper. This option makes the interview less conversational, but you can use the extra time to gather more and/or longer stories.

Finally, **save five minutes** at the end of the interview for an **after-party**, when your interviewee can reflect on the experience they just had.

During the interview

During your introduction

Start with the introduction you prepared and rehearsed. If you will be using paper or online forms, briefly show them now, so people can see that they have an obligation to fulfill before they leave the interview.

Turn on your audio recorder or prepare to take notes.

Next, ask (or show) your (one or more) prepared story-eliciting questions.

Expect a pause as people take in the question(s). Don't rush to fill the silence. Let them think for a minute. If the silence goes on for a very long time, say or show the question(s) again, rephrase the question(s), or bring out more questions.

- **Don't ask if people understand** your goals or method. Don't mention PNI. Don't give a lecture on what a story is and isn't, *even if people ask for one*. Don't expose the "plumbing" behind what you are doing. If you do, people will use up your interview time discussing the "pedagogy" or "intellectual rigor" of your approach.
- **Don't tell a story**, even if you are sorely tempted to provide an example to people who seem to demand one. Just keep asking your story-eliciting questions, rewording them if necessary, until people start responding.
- **If you get really stuck**, try a self-fulfilling prophecy. Say, "When people get together and talk about things, they usually end up telling some stories about their experiences. That's what we're doing today." Yes, you said the word "story" before anyone told a story. But when people don't pick up *indirect* references to storytelling, sometimes you have to give them *direct* references. (It's still better than telling a story yourself.)

Don't set a time limit for the storytelling. The moment you do that, you have transformed an open story-sharing conversation into a closed story-performing transaction, and your interviewee will stop reflecting on your questions and start giving you whatever it is they think you want from them. Just let them talk (but see below for advice on what to do if they talk for too long).

As the first story starts

If your interviewee responds to your question(s) with something that is not a story, **help them make it into a story** by asking follow-up questions, like these:

- (If they state an opinion) Can you think of a particular time when that was true?
- (If they mention a long time period) What was a high or low point of that time for you?
- (If they state a fact) How has that state of affairs impacted you? Was there ever a time when you experienced something personally related to it?

Keep drawing their attention back to **times, events, and experiences**. (You can think of it as: TEE off a story.) Most people will eventually pick up on what you are asking them to do and start doing it.

When your interviewee does start telling an actual story – and this could happen right away, or it could happen after five minutes of clarification – provide abundant positive feedback. Lean forward. Nod. Say "wow" and "hm" and "really?" Look interested, and not in a fake way. Show them that *this is what you were looking for*.

During the first storytelling

It's okay to ask respectfully curious questions as a story is being told. They don't have to be on your story form. Don't interrupt, but do watch for a signal that the storyteller would appreciate an encouraging question. Often a storyteller will **pause** in the middle of their story and seek out a reaction from their audience. When you see this, take the cue and respond. Say, "What was *that* like?" or "Wow, what happened after that?" **Give the storyteller a reason to stay in the story** until they have finished telling it.

As the story begins to draw to a close, **continue to respond** in a way that shows you heard the story and understood the perspective from which it was told. Even if you didn't *like* the story, you can still honestly say that you heard it.

What if the story *doesn't* draw to a close? What if the person goes on and on? Two different responses are appropriate in different contexts.

- If the person is talking for a long time *because they have a deep need to express themselves*, **let them talk** for as long they seem to need to. As soon as their need to be heard seems to have been met, signal to them that it's time to move on to the next part of the interview.
- If the person is talking for a long time but does *not* seem to be communicating a deep need to express themselves, respond in the same way you normally would when a person goes on for a very long time in conversation. Look away or down; fidget; say "uh-huh" in a let's-move-on sort of way. Don't cut them off, and don't be disrespectful. But do signal to them that it is time to move on.

Whatever you do, when the person has stopped telling their story, **don't thank them for it**. Doing so makes the story sound like a *thing*, a thing you took from them. If you want to thank them, thank them for *telling you the story*. That brings their attention to the *event* of the storytelling, not the story itself.

After the first story is over

When you are sure the story is over, **ask the questions** on your story form.

- If you are asking your questions out loud, try to blend them into the conversation. Don't say, "Okay, now I have to ask you these questions." Just say, "Wow, thanks for telling me that. How do you *feel* about that story?" and so on.
- If you are asking your questions using an online or paper form, show the person the form and say, "Could you please answer these questions about the story you just told?" Then, as they fill out the form, be ready to discuss their answers, if they want you to do that. If not, sit patiently and wait for them to be ready to tell another story.

As more stories are told

After the first story has been told, and the first set of follow-up questions have been asked and answered, it's time to go back to your story-eliciting questions.

- If you asked one question, ask your interviewee to see if they have another answer to the same question. Or you can ask a second question.
- If you gave your interviewee a menu of questions, you can ask them to look over the menu again and choose a different question to answer this time.

As you go through the interview, keep asking for stories, listening to them, and asking follow-up questions. Just watch your time so you don't miss out on the after-party.

During the after-party

When you have about five minutes left, **ask the interviewee to answer some questions about themselves**. Do not ask them to answer questions about themselves at the start of the interview. It will put them off telling stories. Keep the attention away from them until the end of the interview.

After the about-you questions are taken care of, **start the after-party** with a question like, "So how was that? What was it like for you?" Then listen to what they have to say.

They may want to keep telling stories. If they do, that's great. (I always plan some extra time in case interviewees want to keep the party going.) Ask if they mind if you keep recording (or taking notes) and keep asking them questions about the stories they tell. If they are fine with that, you can extend the interview. If they don't like that, **just let them talk**. Your goal is to stay with them until they feel fully heard – or as fully heard as you can help them feel, anyway.

After the interview

Immediately after the interview is finished, **check your stories**. If they are in the form of notes, go back and see if there is anything you want to add to them. If you made an audio recording, check it now. If something went wrong, the stories are still fresh in your mind, and you can capture some notes about them.

Open your course log and find this activity in it. Answer the questions there.

If you don't have time

I set up this course to help you practice gathering stories in four different ways:

- through individual interviews

- through group interviews
- in group story-sharing sessions
- with a web or paper survey

I recommend that you avail yourself of all of these opportunities to learn. However, you don't *have* to collect stories in all of these ways to learn from this course. What you do need is **at least 24 stories**. It is up to you to decide how you will gather them in the time and with the participation and resources you have available to you.

If you are already used to gathering stories in interviews, for example, you might want to put more time into facilitating story-sharing sessions. Or if you have already done a lot of surveys, you might want to skip that collection method. (In fact, I have listed it as optional because I think a lot of people have probably done surveys before.)

Remember that you have a total of **six weeks to gather 24 stories**. If your story collection starts up slowly – say you can't get people to talk to you, or people are too busy, or *you* are too busy – don't worry. You can collect all of the stories you need even in the last week of the six. It will be a busy week, but you can do it. Just focus on being ready to move on to the next part of the course when the six weeks of story collection are over.

Stretch challenges

How can you do more when gathering stories in individual interviews? Here are a few ideas.

- Don't do your very first interview with one of your project participants. **Rehearse** it with a friend, colleague, or family member. And ask your rehearsal partner to challenge you. Ask them to respond to your eliciting questions without telling stories, then practice guiding them toward storytelling. After they do tell a story, ask them to challenge your questions about the story. See if they can help you improve your interview practice before you speak to your project participants.
- Record yourself interviewing someone (either in the project or during a rehearsal). After the interview, listen to the recording and evaluate your behavior. Consider these questions:
  - When in this interview did I show **respectful curiosity**? Did I ever fail to do that?
  - How well did I support the **rituals** of storytelling? How did help the interviewee through the beginnings (abstract), middles (evaluation), and ends (coda) of the stories they told? How did they respond? How could I have done that better?
  - During the course of the interview, what sorts of **needs** did the interviewee communicate to me? Were they bored, annoyed, offended, confused, intimidated, or excessively compliant? Did I **notice** those needs? Did I address them? What could I have done better?
  - What subtle **signals** did I send to the interviewee about what I wanted them to do or say – for example, on how to frame the story, how long to make it, what language to use, how much to reveal, how much emotion to express? Did they pick up on those signals? Did I send any signals unintentionally? What was the result of that?

- If you want your individual interview practice to be more complete (with relation to your project), interview at least one person from each of your participant groups. If you do that, you will be sure to have covered that mode of story collection from each perspective.

3c. Transcribe your collected stories

If you made an audio recording of your interview, listen to it now and convert it into written text. (Using a transcription service or software also works, as long as you correct its errors.)

If you asked your questions about each story in the interview (instead of, say, asking people to fill out a form), you don't have to transcribe *that* part of the interview. Just fill out a copy of the story form with the answers the person gave you. You only need a *verbatim* transcript of the actual stories, plus any answers to free-text questions you asked.

If you don't have time – to transcribe any stories at all

You can use audio stories in sensemaking, and sometimes it is the best option, for example for older people, children, or the illiterate. But for most people, text stories are so much easier to handle that in practice, most story workers record and transcribe the stories they collect. Careful transcription can capture much of the meaning in told stories while reducing the effort required to get them ready to use in sensemaking. (Be sure to read the section of *Working with Stories Simplified* on transcribing stories.)

However, transcription does take time. If you know going into this course that you will not have time to transcribe the stories you will collect, or if you know you don't want to transcribe your stories for some other reason, you can plan to use either of two methods of getting story texts ready for sensemaking.

First, you can **take notes** on each story, or have a helper sit in on your interviews and sessions and take notes. Then you can use the notes in your sensemaking, also **making each story's audio version available** in case people want to hear the rest of the story.

Second, you can **ask your participants to summarize their stories** in writing just after they have finished telling them (to you or to other project participants). Just put a big empty box at the start of your story form and label it with a prompt like "Please summarize the story you just told. What happened in the story?"

Asking people to summarize their stories **saves time** you would otherwise have to spend transcribing stories or cleaning up automatic transcripts. You can use that extra time to gather more stories from more participants. If your participants are used to writing things down, they might not mind helping with the project in this way. Also, if your participants do not trust you, they may not be willing to trust that your transcripts will be verbatim (and not, for example, censored). Giving your participants **permission to craft a written version** of their story, one that captures what mattered to them in the story they told in speech, gives them more power over the project.

The write-what-you-said option does require **more time and attention** on the part of your participants. As a result, some people may write little or nothing. So don't choose this option if

you don't think people will be able or willing to summarize their stories. Take notes or make recordings and transcripts instead.

If you don't have time – just for this first interview

You can put off transcribing your stories until you have conducted a group interview. You could even put off this task until you have facilitated a story-sharing session, though you will have some catch-up work to do then.

Stretch challenges

If you want to be extra certain that your story transcripts are correct (just the first ones or all of them), you can ask your participants to review them. Contact your interviewees, show them your transcriptions, and ask if there is anything they would like to correct or change.

My experience has been that participants like this, but about one out of twenty actually send any feedback. (Still, people like it, and that improves the chance that some of them will be willing to participate in later parts of the project, like sensemaking sessions.) And if people do respond with feedback, you can use it to adjust your transcription style until everyone is happy with what you have done with what they said.

3d. Improve your story form

Now that you have used your story form, how could you improve it? Make any changes you think will help you get better stories and answers to questions. In your course log, paste your improved form and answer the questions.

If you don't have time

Unless you have encountered major problems with your story form, you can skip this activity without much loss to your project.

Stretch challenges

One way to improve your story form as you gather stories is to **grow your questions as you gather your stories**. In your first interview, ask your questions about the story in a completely open-ended way, with no lists of answers to choose from. Just let the interviewee say anything they want to say (even if you already have a draft list of answers). Then do a second interview. This time, use draft answer lists. Invite the interviewee to choose an answer from the list or supply a new one. Then, if you can, do this a third time. In this way you can **let your answer lists emerge** from the experiences of your participants, making it more likely that people in your later sessions will find choices that describe their feelings.

You might be wondering: Why use answer lists at all? Why not ask open-ended questions throughout the story collection process? You *can* do that, of course. The problem is that open-ended text responses aren't all that useful in sensemaking. Most people don't have the patience to read through long, detailed free-text answers during a sensemaking session. It's hard enough to get them to read the stories. **Countable answers generate interesting visual patterns**, and interesting visual patterns help people make sense of the data you collected.

You can generate countable answers yourself by coding free-text answers, but then you run the risk of inserting your own bias. In my experience, the best way to help people make sense of their own data is to **help them build visual patterns** with well-written and well-tested answer lists. If you always include a write-in option, and if you listen to your participants as you develop your answer lists, you won't be silencing anyone.

Part 4: Collection III

4a. Gather stories in a group interview

Group interviewing is an excellent way to gather stories, especially when your participants have had similar experiences, because **they will remind each other** of experiences and emotions you can't guess at. Group interviews work especially well with older people (who tend to forget until they are reminded) and with people who are afraid to speak up.

A group interview is like an individual interview, except that:

- There are multiple storytellers in the conversation, not just one.
- Every storyteller can hear and respond to the other storytellers.
- When you engage with one storyteller, everyone else can hear you.

These differences mean that you have to a few things differently when you set out to interview multiple people at the same time.

Build your groups carefully

Don't interview participants together if they have widely varying amounts of power in any context that matters to your project. If you do, the powerful people will talk and everyone else will listen. And if you force the less powerful people to talk, they will say what they think the powerful people want to hear.

Some mixing of people with varied experiences can be helpful. Experts and novices are two good groups to mix. Novices are good at keeping experts from saying "you know how it is" and stopping there (without actually telling any stories). But don't mix people with *wildly* varying experiences, like (say) people who have lived in a big city all of their lives and people who have never left the countryside. They will not remind each other of anything. If your goal is to improve communication among people with wildly varying experiences, gather your stories from both groups separately, then bring the stories together during sensemaking.

Give everyone code names

In an individual interview, you don't have to keep track of who said what; there's only one storyteller. In a group interview, things are more complicated. You need to keep track of who told what story, but you don't want to identify people by name. **Give each participant a unique identifier**. It can be a number, a letter, an animal, or a type of cloud – it doesn't matter, as long as you stick to the same system throughout the session.

Help your participants build story chains

In an individual interview, there is a one-to-one ratio between story-eliciting questions and stories. You ask: they tell. In a group interview, story-eliciting questions are only there to get the ball rolling. Most of the stories collected in a group interview should be told in response to other stories. You ask: they tell, and then *they* tell, and *they* tell, and so on.

Story chains emerge naturally in many groups, especially when people know each other. You may find that you only need to use your story-eliciting question(s) once, and that all of the rest of the stories in the interview flow in a chain from that one spark.

On the other hand, you may need to **relight the fire** a few times as the interview goes on. Especially when people don't know or trust each other, or when the topic is sensitive, you may need to step in and give the group a nudge from time to time.

To help people build story chains, practice these steps.

- As each story is being told, **listen for hooks**: aspects of each story that might connect them to other stories not yet told. Notice elements like characters, locations, behaviors, emotions, events, challenges, and so on.
- As each story ends, **wait and see** if another story comes bubbling up. Let the group sit in silence for a moment.
- If nobody says anything, **reinforce the permission** to respond to the story with another story. Say something like, "Has anyone else had an experience like that?" And then wait a bit longer.
- If nobody still says anything, **bring out your hook**. Say something like, "That story took place on a train. Has anyone else had an experience on a train that related to ___ (the topic)?" Or, "The people in that story really trusted each other. Can anyone else remember a time when trust was important to them?"
- If that doesn't work, bring the group's attention back to your **eliciting question(s)**. Rephrase them if necessary.

Should you "go around the circle," asking each person to share a story in turn? I don't recommend it. It's harder to get a story chain going when stories *must* be told in a certain order. Plus, giving everyone a turn makes storytelling seem like more of a performance than a conversation. The better thing to do is to help story chains grow by strengthening the links between stories.

As you do this, though, **keep track of who has and has not told a story**. When the next pause comes, say something like, "We haven't heard from Jarah or Aline yet. Is there an experience either of you would like to tell us about?" But don't *make* anyone tell a story. If a person doesn't want to speak up, leave them alone. They might still be interested in a one-on-one interview.

Save your story forms for the end of the session

In an individual interview, asking questions just after each story is told does not interrupt the flow of the conversation. It *is* the conversation. In a group interview, **you can't ask questions after each story**, because everyone *else* will have nothing to do.

Instead:

- After each participant has finished telling a story, ask them to **give their story a name**. Say, "What name would you like to use to refer to that story?" If people don't seem to want to do this, give the stories names yourself. Make sure the names are short, simple, and visual, like "The advisor" or "Maybe tomorrow" or "In Spain." **Keep a running list of story names** (and who told them) on a whiteboard or notepad.
- When there are ten minutes left in the interview (before the time you saved for the after-party), **ask each person to fill out a story form for every story they told**. Show or give each person a list of story names.
- If you are not recording and transcribing stories, make sure your story form has big empty box at the top for people to summarize the story in.
- Make sure everyone can see that everyone else is also filling in their story forms. If you let people answer questions in a staggered fashion, half of them won't do it. Peer pressure is a wonderful way to get people to do possibly-boring things.

If you don't have time

Try to do at least one group interview, if you can. The dynamics are different than in the individual interview or story-sharing session. You can hold a group interview with two people in an hour.

Stretch challenges

As with individual interviews, it would be most comprehensive to hold one group interview with each group of participants in your project.

Here's another idea: Read "The Ultimate Guide to Anecdote Circles," which the Anecdote group has published here:

https://www.anecdote.com/pdfs/papers/Ultimate_Guide_to_ACs_v1.0.pdf

Anecdote circles are basically the same as what I call group narrative interviews (and I worked with Shawn Callahan ages ago, so some of our ideas come from the same place). After you read that (excellent) document, hold another group interview, incorporating what you have learned from it as well as what you have learned from me.

In general, you should feel free to incorporate any resource or exercise you find that supports participatory story work into this course. As long as it is meant to help people share stories with each other and make sense of them together, it's fair game.

4b. Transcribe stories

As you did for the individual interview, convert your audio recordings into text transcripts. (And as for the individual interview, there are ways to get around having to do this if you can't or don't want to do it.)

4c. Create and promote a web-based or paper survey (optional)

Use your story form to set up a web-based or paper survey form. Contact your participants and offer them the opportunity to share stories in that way. I marked this activity as optional because I think a lot of people already know how to set up and collect surveys, so you are less likely to need practice with it. But if you want to gather some of your stories using a survey, by all means go ahead and do that.

4d. Prepare at least one story card

A story card is just **a story plus answers to questions about it**, in text and/or audio/video formats, nicely arranged and ready to use in a sensemaking workshop. You can prepare your story cards using any word processor, presentation program, HTML editor, or whatever you use to make nice-looking things.

Story cards should be complete, clear, useful, and attractive – but not so attractive as to make the stories look inauthentic or dressed-up. It should be clear that these are real stories told by real people. Story cards should invite participants to think about the stories and the answers to questions. Finally story cards should be easy to compare and contrast with each other.

This activity is to create **at least one story card**, in the format you intend to use in your sensemaking workshops, show it to the group, and get feedback on it. Afterward, find this activity in your course log and answer the questions there.

If you don't have time

If you need to, you can put off building your first story card until the next part of the course. You won't have one to show to your fellow students, but you can ask everyone to wait and see it later.

Stretch challenges

If you want to put extra time into making sure you get your story cards right, here is a more thorough method you can use.

1. Read what it says above and use it to build your first draft of your first story card.
2. Go to *Working with Stories Simplified* and find the part of chapter 5 (Story Collection) on "Building story cards." Read that section.
3. Go back to your draft story card and improve it. But don't improve it in only one way. Improve it in three different ways. Think of three competing ways in which you could

improve the story card. Pretend you are three different designers with different ideas on how to make the card complete, clear, useful, and attractive.

4. In class, when you show your first story card to your fellow students, (briefly) show them all three versions of the card, and ask what they think about all of them.
5. Use what everyone says to improve your story card one last time.
6. Finally, use your final design to build all the rest of your story cards.

Part 5: Sensemaking I

5a. Facilitate a group story-sharing session

Before the session

Schedule the session. Ask 3-15 project participants to join you for a 60-90 minute group session. Find people who know the topic and are willing and able to *talk to each other* about it. (They will not be talking to you! You will be on the sidelines.) You can meet **in person or online**.

Plan your recording scheme. In an interview, you can record stories by taking notes. In a lively group session, however, this is nearly impossible. Stories can fly thick and fast in a lively group. For this reason, **group sessions should be recorded** if at all possible. If you really can't record a session, enlist the help of multiple note-takers, so you can at least spread out the task of keeping up.

If you will have six or more people in your session, make a plan to **record the stories in each small group**.

- If you will be meeting person, you can use a few burner phones or small digital recorders you distribute around the room.
- If you will be meeting online, you can:
  - Ask helpers (or participants) to make local copies of breakout-room recordings and send them to you.
  - Use multiple online accounts for your breakout rooms.
  - Spread out your sessions so that no session has more than 3 or 4 people in it (thus you will need only one group at a time and can record the main session).

Choose an exercise. Look through the story-sharing exercises in your course readings. Choose an exercise that works for you, your topic, and your participants.

Adapt the exercise to your needs. If you want to rewrite the exercise you chose in language that works better for you, go ahead and do that. You might want to add more time to some parts of the exercise or remove details that don't apply to your situation. For example, if you are sure that you will only have one group, you can remove all of the "small groups" instructions. Prepare a plan that works for you.

Prepare your materials. If the exercise you chose has any physical materials to it, or if it requires any online preparation (for example, a diagram on a whiteboard), get that ready now.

Prepare your story form. Use the same story form as you used in your interviews. Prepare paper copies or an online survey.

Prepare your introduction. You can use the same introduction as you prepared for your individual and group interviews. There is no need to mention the name of the exercise. Just say something like, "We are going to talk about your experiences with ___."

During the session

Start with the introduction you prepared. Then begin the exercise, using your prepared exercise agenda.

Keep the pace. When there is a quick task to complete, don't dawdle, and don't let people dawdle. Get it done fast. When there is a larger block of time, give people a ten-minute warning and a two-minute warning.

Disappear. Once the stories start flowing, fade into the background as much as you can. Don't tell stories, and don't ask questions. Let your participants do the talking. If things are going *very* wrong – say one person is taking over the whole conversation – you may have to intervene. But do it gently. For example, everyone should get a chance to share at least one story. But if you try *too* hard to enforce that rule, you could end up with nothing but superficial stories.

Ask people to give each story a name, just as you did in the group interview. If you have multiple small groups, ask each small group to choose one person to **take on the role of story namer.** That person should make sure that each story gets a name and that a running list of names is kept on a whiteboard or notepad.

Pause to fill in story forms. In each story-sharing exercise there is a **5-minute pause** in which people can answer questions about the stories they told. Have your story forms ready for that moment. Ask your story namers to give or show each person their story names. Make sure everyone can see that everyone else is doing this.

After the session

Check your stories. If they are in the form of notes, go back and see if there is anything you want to add to them. If you made an audio recording, check it now. If something went wrong, the stories are still fresh in your mind, and you can capture some notes about them.

Open your course log and find this activity in it. Answer the questions there.

If you don't have time

Of the four story-gathering methods covered in this course, **this one is the most important** for building your PNI practice. That's because:

- this is the most **useful** way to collect good stories for sensemaking
- this is the most **difficult** way to gather stories
- you are least **likely** to have experienced this method of story collection before

So if you can only afford the time to practice one story collection method, unless you have facilitated story-sharing sessions before, I suggest putting your time into this one.

If you want to do more in this part of the project – and if you can get enough participation to support it – challenge yourself to **try out every story-sharing exercise** described in *Working with Stories Simplified*: twice-told stories, timeline, landscape, ground truthing, and local folk tales. You can even print out the Narratopia game and use it to gather some stories for your project.

And you can go beyond *Working with Stories Simplified.* **Look on the internet for story-sharing exercises** and try using some of those as well. For example, some well-known ice-breaker games can work to gather stories. For example:

- two truths and a lie (tell about two true experiences and include one tall tale)
- never have I ever (follow up each declaration with a related story about something that did happen)
- experience bingo (create bingo cards listing experiences people might have had, call out locations, and ask for volunteers to tell about experiences that fit into those locations)
- ten things we have in common (three experiences we have had in common)
- ten superpowers we have (three times when we had superpowers – or wished we did)

Just make sure that the ice-breaker exercises you try out do not ask people to perform, compete, or make fun of each other, especially if your project topic is sensitive. Depending on what you are asking people to talk about, fun and games might or might not be appropriate.

Finally, you can challenge yourself to **build your own story-sharing exercise**. Go to *Working with Stories* (not the *Simplified* version), to Chapter 9 (Group Exercises for Story Collection), and read the section called "Build Your Own Story Collection Exercise." Do what it says there. Draw on your own creativity to build something that works for you and your project.

5b. Transcribe stories

As you did for your interviews, convert your audio recordings into text transcripts. (Or don't.)

5c. Finish preparing your story cards

Convert each story into a card ready to use in sensemaking.

Part 6: Sensemaking II

6a. Facilitate a story-contact task

When you dump a lot of stories in front of people without any instructions as to what to do with them, most people don't think about what the stories mean. What they do is read the stories, one after another, and accept or reject each one: this story makes sense, this story relates to me, this story sounds right, this story doesn't. The stories go into two bins: **good**

stories and bad stories. That's not surprising, because one of the functions of stories is to judge accountability. And it is useful to do that! But it's useful in a very simple way.

Your goal is to help people go beyond such simple judgements to the **deeper exploration of meaning** in the entire body of stories you have collected. So you need to give them something to do that goes beyond binary judgement. The contact tasks I have described in this course help people do that. The more complex sensemaking exercises that you will use later on (landscape, timeline, and so on) delve even more deeply into the meanings in the stories. But let's start with a task that is still relatively simple.

Before the session

Choose a contact task. Look through the sensemaking exercises in your course readings and choose a simple task (sorting, ranking, clustering, or pairing). Which task seems like it will be the most useful for your project and the most interesting to your participants? You will have another opportunity to use a contact task again later, so if you can't decide which task to use, use one now and another later.

Practice the task. It's a good idea to try out your chosen contact task on your own. Sort your stories, rank them, cluster them, or pair them up with your own stories. Experience what you want to ask people to experience. See what it feels like.

Practice introducing the task. More specifically, practice introducing the task *simply*. Don't say things like, "Stay with me here, this is about to get complicated" – even if it is – because what people will hear is "You can't do this." They *can* do this. The contact tasks (and sensemaking exercises) in PNI are no more complicated than most board games. To convey the (relative) simplicity of the task, practice saying things like, "Okay, so this is how this works" or "Here's how to do this."

Plan your agenda. Even with a very simple sensemaking session like this one, your agenda should still have four parts: introduction, tasks or exercises, wrap-up, and after-party. Think about how much time you want to allocate to each part.

1. Your **introduction** should be brief and simple.
2. Next come your **contact tasks and exercises**, however long they will take. In this case, you will have just one contact task (sorting, ranking, clustering, or pairing).
3. To **wrap things up**, prepare a few categories of things you would like people to list, like surprises, discoveries, insights, and so on. Make sure you have a place to write down these things (a place everyone can see) as people call them out.
4. Be ready to launch the **after-party** with a simple reflective question like "So what was that like for you?"

If you can't get people to commit to the time period you will need for your session, start with your ideal agenda, then **trim down parts** here and there, stopping when you cringe at what is likely to happen in so little time. If every part has been trimmed as far as it will go and you're still way over, drop a whole section of your plan. It is better to simplify an over-packed agenda than to try to rush through it.

No matter how much slack there is in your agenda, it is always useful to **create a time-crunch plan**. Mark a few parts of the agenda as **especially shrinkable** if you are running late. Like a crumple zone in a car, such markings can protect the most important parts of the session.

Once you have figured out how you are going to allocate your time, write up an agenda you can take with you to the session. You don't have to write down every tiny detail of your plan! But making the plan will help you work it out.

Practice your introduction. The introduction you give in your sensemaking sessions should be somewhat like the one you used in your interviews. However, since people will be working with stories rather than telling them, it should also be different. For one thing, you can go ahead and say the word "story" right away, because people will have example stories right in front of them. As before, **keep your introduction brief**, a few minutes at most. Don't deliver a lecture on sensemaking or stories or anything else. Just give people a quick idea of what is going to happen, then start them on their first task.

Practice the introductions to each task. As you introduce each task, set expectations carefully. Don't say things like, "Stay with me here, this is about to get complicated" – even if it is – because what people will hear is "You can't do this." They *can* do this. The sensemaking exercises in PNI are no more complicated than most board games. To convey the (relative) simplicity of the task, practice saying things like, "Okay, so this is how this works" or "Here's how to do this" or "Here's the game plan."

Get your story cards ready. See the section called "Setting up small groups" in the Sensemaking short readings to decide how many small groups you want to support. Then decide how many sets of cards and materials you will need (one per group, or one poster-sized set on the walls, or one storyteller per group).

A special note on timing and story volume

Depending on how many stories you collected, it may be impossible for every participant in your sensemaking sessions to absorb (read or listen to) every story. But people often want to do exactly that. The resulting conflict can throw a wrench into the best sensemaking plans.

The antidote to this problem is to plan in advance **how many stories you will ask people to absorb** based on:

- how much time you can give to the story-contact task
- how long your stories are, on average
- how fast you think people will be able to absorb the stories

If you can't let every participant read every story, **give them a way to access the stories later**. This can range from a public web site to contact information they can use to request a copy of the stories. Be careful not to give the impression that you are *forbidding* people access to the stories. Make it clear that this is a *time* constraint, not a form of control.

It is also fine to **trim down very long stories** to fit into the time better. Just make a note that you have done this and give people a way to access each unabridged story if they want to (on the spot or later on).

During the session

Start with the introduction you prepared. Then begin the contact task, using your prepared agenda.

Start recording. You don't need to make transcripts in a sensemaking session, but you might want to record the session anyway. An audio recording can help you look back and reflect on what happened later on. And if you intend to write a project report (maybe for your funders), a transcript could help you capture some of the key moments in the session – when a group discovered an insight, for example – and provide some useful verbatim quotes.

Introduce the project, topic, and stories. Give a quick hint of the planned tasks and/or exercises, then get started with the contact task.

Let it flow. Sensemaking exercises, including contact tasks, are basically games. Set up the rules, give people their gaming materials, and let them go.

Watch for snags. Fade into the background, but watch what is going on and be ready to help or intervene if necessary.

Manage the transitions. No matter what sorts of tasks and exercises you have in your agenda, pay special attention to the moment that comes just after one ends and before the next one starts. People sometimes lose interest or become annoyed when you ask them to switch from one task to another. They might not want to stop doing the first task; they might be tired; or they might feel like you are asking too much of them. It helps to give people a break between the two tasks to re-energize, and it helps to (briefly) explain *why* you are asking them to move on to a new task.

Watch your time. Give people ten-minute and two-minute warnings. If things start falling behind, shrink some of your previously-prepared shrinkable parts.

After the session

Open your course log and find this activity in it. Answer the questions there.

If you don't have time

The sensemaking portion of this course has three parts in it because I wanted to give you **three opportunities to practice** facilitating sensemaking. However, you may find it difficult to find the time (yours or that of your participants) to set up and run three separate meetings. That's okay. You can still get a lot out of facilitating one or two sensemaking sessions.

- If you can only facilitate **one** sensemaking session, I suggest you facilitate only a full sensemaking session (as described in part 8), with a contact task followed by a sensemaking exercise and a wrap-up task.
- If you can facilitate **two** sensemaking sessions, I suggest facilitating one session with only a contact task (part 6) or only a sensemaking exercise (part 7), and a second session with the full three-part schedule (part 8).

In either of these cases, you do not need to do any activity in this part of the course. Or you can keep gathering stories or transcribing or getting your story cards ready, if you still need to work on those things.

Stretch challenges

Based on what I said in the stretch challenges for the story-sharing exercise, I'll bet you can guess what I'm going to say here. You can try every contact exercise I describe in *WWS-S*, and you can try out some other activities that might work as contact exercises. Here's what to look for in a contact exercise.

- A good contact exercise helps people **approach** the collected stories gently and with respect in an open and listening exploration rather than a closed and critical evaluation.
- A good contact exercise helps people **explore** and discuss the collected stories in a quiet, safe, face-saving way that does not challenge them or put them on the spot.
- A good contact exercise helps people **connect** the collected stories to their own experiences and perspectives, either by arranging the collected stories into groupings that have meaning to them or by responding to the collected stories with stories of their own.

Evaluate any exercise you find or create by these criteria. When you are sure it meets them, try it out in practice. Then watch what happens.

Remember: the sensemaking exercises I describe in this course were not received on tablets of stone. They originated and evolved in practice: in the course of carrying out real projects with real participants. As you build your own PNI practice – and your own flavor of PNI – you can change the exercises you see here, and you can build your own exercises. Look in *WWS*, in the chapter on sensemaking exercises, for a section called "Build Your Own Sensemaking Exercise."

Part 7: Sensemaking III

7a. Facilitate a sensemaking exercise

Before the session

Your preparations for this session will be exactly like your preparations for the previous session, except that instead of a contact task you will have a sensemaking exercise (such as twice-told tales, timeline, story elements, landscape, ground truthing, local folk tales, or composite stories). Everything else will be as before. (If you didn't practice facilitating a contact task, go back and read those instructions now.)

During the session

You can run this session exactly as you did for the previous contact-task-only session. Start with the same introduction; record the session if you want to; establish the rules of the exercise; then step back and let it flow – but intervene if things don't go as planned, and watch your time.

After the session

Open your course log and find this activity in it. Answer the questions there.

If you don't have time

As with the contact-task-only session, you can skip this session if you must. Even if you only end up facilitating one sensemaking session in this course – which I don't recommend, because you will have no chance to reflect on the experience and try it again – you will still learn something. So don't worry if you are too busy in this part of the course, or if you can't get people to come to a session. Make up for it in the next part.

Stretch challenges

If you happen to have the time and the participation to try facilitating more than one sensemaking exercise, by all means do so. The more exercises you can try, the greater the likelihood that you will find one that works especially well for you. Everyone I know who does much PNI-type work has a favorite sensemaking exercise. See if you can figure out what yours is. And of course, the more sensemaking you can do the better your project will become.

If you want to build your own sensemaking exercise, find the section in Chapter 12 (Group Exercises for Narrative Sensemaking) of *Working with Stories* called "Build Your Own Sensemaking Exercise." Follow the instructions given there. Then try out your new exercise. (And if it works well, be sure to tell people about it so they can use it too.)

Part 8: Intervention and Return

8a. Facilitate a full sensemaking workshop

Before the session

To start preparing for this session, choose a contact task, either the one you used before or a new one. Then choose a sensemaking exercise (that is *not* a contact task). Think about the interface you want to create between the task and the exercise. For example:

- You could choose an exercise that is **very different from** your contact task. For example, if you used a placement type of task (say ranking), rather than following it up with a landscape exercise, which is also placement, you might want to switch things up with a story elements exercise.
- On the other hand, you could choose an exercise that **builds on** your contact task. This approach offers participants a deeper layer of exploration. For example, if you start with a ranking task, you could use the ranking as the first dimension of a landscape exercise. Or if you start with a pairing task, you could ask people to preserve the source of each story (collected before versus told just now) as they place sticky notes onto a timeline.

Switching things up is the best option when you don't expect much enthusiasm from your participants. Going deeper is better when you know your participants will be eager to explore.

Whatever task and exercise you choose, **practice** doing and introducing both. Remember to explain them simply.

Next, think about what sorts of **list items** you want to collect in your wrap-up time.

Finally, work out how much **time** you will spend on each item in your agenda. This time your session should have five parts:

1. (5-10 minutes) an introduction
2. (30-90 minutes) a task
3. (60-120 minutes) an exercise
4. (5-15 minutes) the wrap-up
5. (5-15 minutes) the after-party

Think about how much time you want to allocate to each part. Since this will likely be a longer session, think about where you might want to place a five or ten minute break.

This is the last sensemaking session of the course, and of your project. Decide how ambitious you want to be with it. You can fill it up with as much or as little complexity as you want it to have. Starting with the basic agenda (introduction, task, exercise, wrap-up, after-party), decide what you want to explore. You might want to try a different contact task than you used before. You might even want to include a second sensemaking exercise. However, there is also value in using the same exercise twice (with different participants) to hone your skills. It's up to you.

During the session

Do the same things as you did in the previous session(s), except **do more of whatever worked** before and less of whatever didn't work before.

Pay special attention to the moments that come just after the contact task and before the sensemaking exercise, and just after the sensemaking exercise and before the wrap-up time. People sometimes lose interest or become annoyed when you ask them to switch from one task to another. They might not want to stop doing the first task; they might be tired; or they might feel like you are asking too much of them. If you can, give people a break between activities to re-energize.

After the session

Open your course log and find this activity in it. Answer the questions there.

If you don't have time

This is the most important activity you will do in this course. Don't skip it and don't rush through it. **Make the time to pay attention to this activity**.

Stretch challenges

I have been in sensemaking sessions that ran for three consecutive eight-hour workplace days, and I can confidently say that **no one has ever reached the upper limit** of what is possible in a sensemaking session. You can keep going with sensemaking for a very long time.

I can think of three ways to do more sensemaking than I have described in this course.

1. Hold one session per **participant group**. Sometimes it is not possible, and sometimes it is not advisable, to hold one sensemaking session with everyone who wants to participate in your project. The different groups might not get along, or they might see things too differently to work together fruitfully. In that case you might want to hold separate sensemaking sessions for each participant group. Your project report (which should be made available to all participants) should include a record of what took place in each session.
2. Hold one session per **sub-topic**. During your project, you may find that your original topic has spread out into two or three or four sub-topics, each of which seems like it would reward attention during sensemaking. You could then hold a series of sensemaking sessions, each of which addresses a single sub-topic. The same people could come to all of the sessions (making the series a sort of seminar), or you could gather different people for each.
3. Build a **pyramid** of sensemaking. You could hold a sensemaking workshop with each participant group (or on each sub-topic), then follow up with a combined workshop that includes people from all groups (or covers all sub-topics) and draws on the outcomes from all previous workshops. With creativity and careful planning, every sensemaking exercise can be taken to the next level. For example:
   a. You could record the stories that bubbled up in several **twice-told stories** exercises. Then in the combined workshop, you could ask people to retell those stories, then choose some stories among them that connect the previous workshops in some way (building bridges, exploring differences, etc.).
   b. If the people in your separate-group sessions built sets of **story elements**, you could cluster those clusters together in the final combined workshop. Then you could compare the combined meta-clusters to those from the first level.
   c. You could layer the **landscapes** created in your first-level workshops into a sort of conceptual geographical information system (GIS), and you could ask people to build vertical connections among the layers of meaning.
   d. You could juxtapose **timelines** built in several first-level workshops and ask people to find points of connection (and disconnection) among them.

The most important thing to remember in scaling up sensemaking is the value of **nesting**. In the same way that a single story can contain many perspectives without forcing consensus among them, sensemaking need not end in a grand consensus, no matter how ambitious or multi-layered it is. You can **preserve intact the kaleidoscope of perspectives** you have discovered and explored within your project.

8b. Prepare to present an account of your project

You will have ten minutes of class time to tell everyone what happened in your project. You can do a little or as much with those ten minutes as you want to. Everyone will be listening with respectful curiosity to **the story of your project**:

- what you planned to do
- what you hoped would happen

- what did happen:
  - how the various activities went
  - what surprised you (and what didn't)
  - what challenges and opportunities arose
  - how the project turned out
  - what people said to you about the project
- what you learned:
  - about the topic of the project
  - about yourself (and your strengths and weaknesses)
  - about PNI (and its strengths and weaknesses)
  - about your own flavor of PNI
- what you would like to do next

You can use this list to plan your presentation. Or you can use it without preparation during the class. Just read each prompt aloud, then talk a little about it.

These are some other things you might want to show during your presentation:

- Things people built in your sensemaking sessions (timelines, landscapes, etc.)
- Wrap-up lists people filled in during sensemaking (discoveries, curiosities, etc.)
- Excerpts from some of the pivot, discovery, and voice stories you found in your sensemaking (what are those? see *WWS-S*, chapter 7 (Narrative Sensemaking), "Facilitating Convergence")
- Things people said about the project itself (expressions of gratitude, discomfort, distrust, confusion, revelation, etc.)

If you don't have time

You do not have to spend any time preparing to talk about your project. You can just show up at the last meeting and talk about what you remember. Building an actual presentation is an optional activity.

Stretch challenges

If you are serious about doing PNI, this activity is an excellent opportunity to **practice making the case for your flavor of PNI**. As you prepare to present your project, pretend that you need funding or permission to do the next project you want to do, and that your success in getting that funding or permission will hinge on how well you present your work in this project.

8c. Do some optional wrapping-up things

All of these activities are optional. You can choose to spend lots of time on them! But you don't have to. It's up to you.

Plan and carry out a narrative intervention

Look through the interventions described in the readings. Choose one and do it, either fully or as an experimental prototype. When you are finished, open your course log and find this activity in it. Answer the questions there.

Return stories to the community

In whatever way works for you, your project, and your participants, return the stories to the people who told them and to the community or organization to which they belong. When you are finished, open your course log and find this activity in it. Answer the questions there.

Write a project report

Take all of your materials and combine them into some kind of report on the project as a whole. When you are finished, open your course log and find this activity in it. Answer the questions there.

Reflect on your project

Open your course log and find this activity in it. Answer the questions there.