



# Culture Hack Method:

## Ask

How to create a common ground without erasing diversity.

This process is directed towards finding a common ground in a group that plans to organize around a shared struggle (this group can be diverse in roles and belong to different pre established teams) with the intention of listening to all the voices in the room, sharing the personal experiences and the emotions around the struggle, and finding the common motivation to organize.

### Who?

Organizers, activists, land defenders, etcetera who are either working with a group for the first time, or who have come to a point where the collective commitments must be reiterated to continue the work

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### How to engage with this step

This process requires for the whole group engaging to be in the same physical space. It requires two facilitators, something to write with and a space big enough for people to sit in circle. The time frame for this process can vary depending on the number of questions asked, the length of the answers and the number of people involved; however, we recommend at least a full hour for small groups and at least two hours for large groups.

## ASK

The step of “asking” is a political and strategic entrypoint into narrative work. When we “ask”, we situate ourselves in the narrative landscape and the struggles that we are fighting. We ask questions of ourselves. Who are we? What brought us together? What are our dreams and fears? What is the outcome we expect and what is the future we imagine?

Organizers work in diverse coalitions and come to work with diverse experiences. The process of asking holds two principles: (1) people are experts on their own lives and struggles (2) among the people we have in the room we can begin a shared process of seeing, understanding and then reframing the narratives that tangibly impact our struggle. The desired outcome of this step is simply to locate us in relation to the narrative and generate a sort of ‘manifesto’ for an intended intervention. Our goal is not to homogenize the collective but rather help uncover the common ground we are starting from . We do this through an exercise of interrogating our existing narrative practices, which incorporates aspects of playback theatre and counter-narrative journalism.



## Theory

Narrative practices, playback theatre and counter-narrative journalism are frameworks focusing on stories that individuals or groups of people tell about themselves and about their struggles. Each approach holds a different perspective: Narrative practices focus heavily on re-authoring; playback focuses on empathy building and seeing the story outside of yourself; and counter-narrative journalism deconstructs mainstream “news stories” telling the variety of counternarratives as people live them.

The focus of narrative practices is on narrating, witnessing/asking, documenting, and connecting. Through these steps a conversation becomes an exercise of deep listening and opening new diverse stories that help us understand how we are, where we are and why.

Some principles that help guide the exercises and help us listen well and always question ourselves:

1. Only together we all know everything.
2. People are experts in their own lives. Local knowledge is legitimate knowledge.
3. The problem is the problem; the person or community is never the problem. The problems to which we respond have their origin in a structural inequity.
4. We are not neutral. We want to contribute to creating stories that strengthen people and communities, in which it is possible to recognize their dignity rather than highlight their marginalization.
5. Identity is a collective achievement, not an individual one.
6. Identities are multi-historical, not monolithic.
7. We document knowledge to transcend the moment.
8. Create links to help enable the worlds we want to see.



## / Further Reading

**Maps of the Narrative Practice** by Michale White is the foundational book of the discipline of narrative practices and it explains its principles as well as its method.

**The Colectivo de Practicas Narrativas** has a repository of exercises and material around their labour in narrative practices; [this is the exercise of externalization](#).

## / Stories

### Letter of the Lake

The Letter of the Lake is a political poetic exercise that is intended to broaden the resonance of the experience of the peoples who defend the territory of the Texcoco Lake watershed. It emerged from a conversation made through narrative practices with 15 women, men, girls and boys from the lakeside towns of the watershed of Texcoco.



## Narrative practice

The first step towards situating us in relation to a narrative has to do with the story that we tell about ourselves as groups who organize, who resist and who communicate. Our collective story is our starting point. It is where we can question our preconceived notions, find our points of connection and our differences.

This exercise is fundamentally about creating space for collective storytelling. It should bring to surface our intentions, our desires and our fears.

### Questions

The first step towards building a narrative practice exercise has to do with defining the questions that will guide the practice. The facilitators gather and decide on the intention of each practice.

To start situating a very diverse group in a struggle, it can be useful to ask initial questions like: What brought us here?

If the intention is to retell a collective lived experience - for example within a group that has just emerged from an intervention/campaign, or that has experienced something traumatic, like an event of state repression - participants can respond to questions like: How do we feel about this event? What are the consequences for me coming from this situation? How have I been dealing with this?

If a group is stuck creatively and need a starting point to an action, asking questions like: What is my dream for this struggle? can help initiate a creative conversation.

### Roles

There are three participant roles in this exercise: facilitators will take on the role of Conductor and Editor, while the rest of the group will be Narrators.

**The Conductor** is the facilitator who oversees posing the questions. They need to be aware of their own body: they need to be grounded and in connection to how they are feeling at the moment, and what the exercise means to them, otherwise they might be projecting a particular emotional response to the stories they are about to hear or they might even come out disturbed by those stories.

The conductor pays continuous attention to the narrators' body language: the volume at which they speak, the pauses they use, their posture, etc. This somatic information can communicate to the conductor when is time to move to a different question, or if it's necessary to linger, perhaps to rephrase the question or specify what is being asked.

**The editor's** role is first to witness, listen and document the practice. The editor's job is not to write down word by word as every narrator tells it, but rather hold in mind the intention of the practice, listen actively and catch phrases that either elaborate significantly on the question or open up new paths and stories around the question. From this act of listening, a text of collective voices will be crafted.



Documenting is the first part of editing, but there will also be a later moment to further edit the piece that comes out of the practice so that the text is readable and can be shared with everyone.

### **There are a few rules of thumb for documenting**

1. Do not put words in the mouth of the narrators. Often when people narrate their stories, they are not very clear, they do not explain things in a consistent manner, or they have trouble finding the right words for their feelings. Do not try to compensate these things by adding a pronoun there, a preposition here or rephrasing all together. The task is to weave the language into prose or verse that gives account of the narrators' stories, not to make an award-winning text. It's the job of the conductor to make sure that narrators fully express themselves or clarify their meaning throughout the exercise. You can cut and paste, but don't rephrase and reinterpret.
2. Look for the connectors. In a narrative practice that is essentially a collective interview with conduction and a specific intention, there will be myriad voices and opinions about the same topic. Narrators might have radically different responses for every question, but there will very likely be themes that are significant to more than one narrator. Maybe they mention their family, or their upbringing, maybe they mention dreams or specific feeling of anger or love, finding these themes and documenting them will help weave their voices; it will help to find the points of connection.
3. Beware to not revive trauma. A narrator might refer to painful or traumatic experiences. It's important to document what relates to the question, acknowledge it in the text, but there is no need to reiterate it. If one narrator has already talked about the events of this trauma, maybe in what you collect from the next narration you can focus on feelings, reactions, aftermath, etc. It's the job of the conductor to shape a conversation that is not focused on reviving trauma, but it's also on the editor to not dwell on it throughout the text.
4. Poetic license. While the editor shouldn't change or reword the stories, it's often said that editors should have a poet's ear. To craft the text of collective voices the editor can use some resources from poetry, like repetition, or cadence (joining groups of words that create a rhythm), highlighting the metaphors and most poetic phrases too.
- 5.

### **The practice**

The conductor will ask the group that is about to become narrators to sit facing each other, preferably in a circle, with enough space to not be touching but close enough so everyone can hear the person narrating. Once everyone is comfortable, the conductor explains the exercise: We are going to ask some questions that helps us connect to why we are doing the work we are doing around this struggle; We are going to ask questions that help us retell the process that we have lived together this past couple of



months. The conductor should also explain the sort of conversation that the group is looking for; if we are looking to make an exercise of collective memory, it's important to focus on events that have been meaningful and resonated throughout the community. If the focus is on what we want as an organized group, the focus can be on desires and fears.

The conductor should not guide the conversation completely, but rather explain the collective goal and offer options for achieving it, while mentioning that there are many ways to get to the objective of the conversation.

Some other things to consider is how large is the group as this will dictate how much people should extend on their answers, and things like language barriers, or even just the space. "Speak clearly and loudly" can be an important indication depending on the place.

**The practice is divided into two parts: narrating and retelling.**

### Narrating

As the questions and replies unfold the conductor will be tasked with keeping a flow to the practice. This effectively means speeding up and slowing down the process, as a music conductor would an orchestra. It's perfectly okay to say, "There are many of us in the room, and we need to be conscientious of everyone's turn, please tell as much as you feel is necessary to answer the question and stop when you feel you've said enough"; at the same time it's the conductor's task to ask follow up questions if the narrator has been too brief: "What do you mean by this?" or "Is that all you wish to say in response to this question?" are also valid approaches.

Throughout the practice there might be stories told that have to do with pain or trauma, conflict or disagreement. The conductor's role is not solve this kind of issues, they are neither therapist nor mediator, however this does not mean that they have no resources to respond to this situation. There is where 'returns' come in practice

### Retelling

Once all the narrators have replied to all the questions comes the moment when the editor reads out loud the text they've been crafting. This is a powerful moment in which narrators will listen to their own words as someone else hears them, and together with the chorus of voices of their peers, so it's important to make a distinction between the moment of narrating and retelling, this can be done by standing up or changing the location.

In the retelling the editor will read their edited version of the practice, a lot of more performative elements can come into play for example mic-check, or a choral reading of the text, etcetera



## / Glossary

**Counterculture-journalism** is written outside of the mainstream media, usually on a small budget and often unpaid, at times heroic in the face of severe repression by the establishment. Driven by a strong sense of urgency, fair play and social justice, these writers, artists, photographers are often working unpaid and marginalized on the fringes of society.

**Playback Theatre** is an interactive form of improvisational theatre in which audience members tell stories from their lives and watch them enacted on the spot.

**Returns** are a concept taken from Playback theatre. This refers to the moment where a theatrical group “returns” the story it’s been told via performance. What is applicable to the narrative exercise is not the performative aspect but the ethics of returns: the idea is to echo what you as an individual (in this case the conductor) is listening being enunciated, it includes no judgement of what’s being said and it doesn’t necessarily tries to express to perfection the narrators sentiment; rather a return says “This is what I am hearing, these events, these feelings, these reactions”