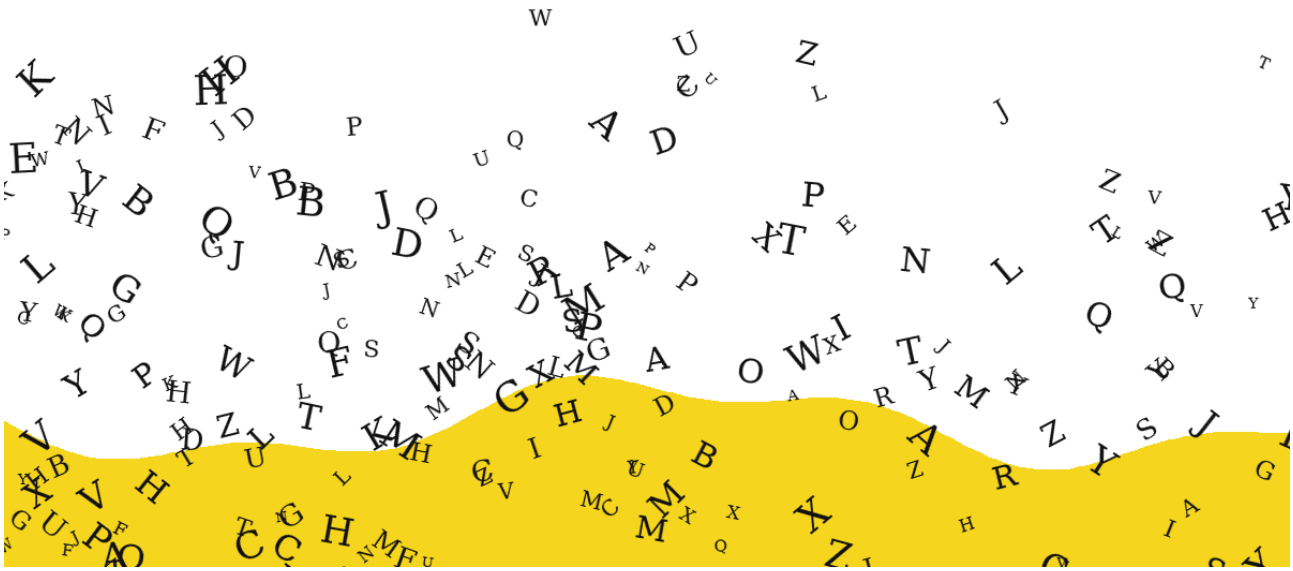
CivicArt

# What If We Don't Ask for Expectations at the Beginning of Training?

*A reflection on process-led learning, curiosity and trust*

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Asking participants to name their expectations at the start of a training is one of the most established rituals of non-formal education. It signals participant-centredness, gives the facilitation team a first read of the group, and marks the symbolic entrance into a different kind of learning space. It is, in many ways, a pedagogical reflex — so embedded in our practice that we rarely stop to question it.

But what if we didn't? What if we do not ask about expectations at the beginning, and do not check them at the end? What if, instead, we co-create the process with participants in a freestyle way, exploring possibilities and opportunities as they emerge? What if, rather than programming what I want to get out of an experience, I open myself to curiosity instead: What can I find out? What is really calling me? What if I try without expecting anything at all? And what if this curiosity belongs not only to participants but to trainers too — where can we arrive? How far can we explore? How much control over the process are we willing to let go of?

From a pedagogical standpoint, this is a shift from an outcomes-first logic — where learning is pre-defined and expectations become a contract to be fulfilled — to a process-first logic, where the learning emerges from genuine exploration, and meaning is constructed rather than delivered. It asks the facilitation team to trust the design itself as the container, rather than distributing part of that responsibility to expectations stated (often performatively) on day one.

This is what we decided to explore at the CivicART Lab in February 2026, part of CivicArt: Capacity-Building for Art-Based Civic Education (Project No. 101184018, Erasmus+ ERASMUS-YOUTH-2024-CB, running since 1 November 2024): to let the group immerse itself in a five-day creative and learning experience without setting expectations beforehand, staying curious instead about the process, the findings, and how far we would go together. Of course, we held a general training frame and identified the main programme elements we considered important — this was not an absence of design, but a different quality of design. Every element was offered through an open pedagogical stance: invitations rather than instructions, reflections rather than debriefings, and shared responsibility for the process rather than a strict framing of learning outcomes.

To make this more concrete, let me sketch briefly how the five days were structured and what they contained. The first day was built around orientation through discovery rather than through explanation: it started with exploring the space itself — inside the building, with an exhibition of all the creative tools participants would be able to use during the Lab, laid out for participants to encounter rather than have listed to them — and in the afternoon moved into a broader exploration of the city where the activity took place, inviting participants to discover what the city itself invites us to notice, through the messages found in bookshop windows, trees, graffiti on the walls, and street manhole covers; pedagogically, the task was designed to awaken curiosity without imposing a strong framing, letting participants build their own first relationship with the place and with each other before any content was introduced. On the second day, we explored Human Rights through the prism of our own values, understandings, and needs, again within a main frame but with a flexible methodology, so it became an emotional, enriching journey full of aha moments — and in the afternoon we introduced the Warm Data methodology to open a collective discussion on togetherness, inviting participants to notice how their own values, relationships, and contexts are entangled with one another rather than treating togetherness as an abstract concept to be defined, a method for staying with complexity rather than for reaching conclusions. Days three and four were dedicated to a Creative Lab, where the earlier exploration and reflection were transformed into expression: participants chose among a wide range of creative tools — slow motion, photo stand, short films, comics, plastic stories, theatre play, music improvisation, and poetry — to shape and pass on their own message of civic activism and togetherness, each tool offering a different language for the same underlying inquiry, with participants free to move between forms, combine them, or commit fully to one, depending on what genuinely called them. The final day turned the group's attention outward, toward the communities they would return to: participants worked on planning follow-up actions — small mini-projects designed to carry the spirit of the Lab back into their local contexts — followed by a closing evaluation of the whole process, where the absence of fixed expectations from the outset paid off most visibly, as the follow-up actions were not measured against expectations stated on day one, but grew organically from five days of genuine exploration, discovery, and shared responsibility.

## Free Will as the Core Element

Free will was the main pedagogical element running through the whole Lab — free will to choose what to do, free will to discuss as far as you feel like, free will to choose which creative tool to use and develop to promote civic education and togetherness, free will to experiment and change decisions along the way. The result was fantastic: fantastic pieces of art with strong messages to the world outside, and fantastic follow-up projects that had great success in the communities.

## So, Is It Possible?

So, is it possible to create and hold a learning process without setting up expectations or asking participants to state them — yes. How? Trust the process, and be open and ready to change some elements on the go. Be open and curious as a team, and pass that curiosity on to the participants.

Pedagogically, this is not an absence of structure but a different distribution of responsibility within it. The frame, the sequencing, the tools — all of this still needs to be designed with care; what shifts is that the meaning of the experience is no longer anchored to expectations declared in advance, but constructed collectively, in real time, through exploration. The trainer's role moves from managing a contract toward holding a container: less “did we deliver what was expected,” more “what became possible because nothing was fixed.” For facilitators trained in outcome-based models, this can feel like giving something up. In practice, it asks for more, not less — more attentiveness, more responsiveness, more trust in the group and in the design — and it opens a kind of learning that a stated expectation could never have anticipated in the first place.

To finish, I want to highlight the importance of — and one of the crucial conditions for — creating such experiences: trust. I want to say thank you to my partner in crime, Dagna Gmitrowicz from KulturNest e.V., who came up with this brilliant idea — and what if we do not ask for expectations at the beginning? — and to the whole consortium for their trust and openness to our methods and approaches.

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