

Consent in A&S: Giving and Taking Helpful Feedback

Goal: To explain some common misunderstandings in communication that can cause frustration in A&S feedback, to identify ways that we can check for explicit consent in both the student and teacher rather than assumed consent, and to provide a framework for asking for and providing specific, useful feedback with the consent of both people.

Common Potential Communication Pitfalls:

1. **Language is not 100% clear: Language is used differently by different people, and while we might think we are being clear sometimes it can be a challenge for us to be understood exactly as we intend** - for example, the phrase “how are you?” - if someone asks that the words mean one thing (a question about your current state), but the standard polite response is “I’m well, and you?” regardless of how you actually are doing. But depending on how well you know the person your response might change - likewise how we ask and respond to A&S questions can change a lot depending on the person and relationship. Words have many different meanings, interpretations, and usage, and it’s important to remember that our communication with them is not perfect.

Scenario:

An artisan goes up to an expert to ask “what do you think of my project?”

- i. **Teacher’s perspective:** This is very open ended and it’s not clear how much feedback the artisan is consenting to receive, do they want specific critiques on how to edit it now? Do they want suggestions for the future? What goals are they working towards? Are they simply being polite and already have people giving them feedback and just want to share it with me?
 - ii. **Artisan 1:** I was feeling nervous and needed validation that A&S was a path I could pursue and would be allowed to follow, but instead I was given a bunch of specifics to fix rather than emotional support, which made me think this was too hard for me to do.
 - iii. **Artisan 2:** I talked to 4 laurels who all said my project was lovely, but when I entered A&S champs I got a mediocre score because of several issues no one pointed out to me. Why didn’t anyone tell me so I could have gotten better?
 - iv. **Overall Lesson Learned:** We can help to address this by asking more specific questions both as artisans and teachers to specify what the artisan is looking to get as feedback.
2. **The “Golden rule” doesn’t always work - All learning styles and preferences can be valid, but assuming that the person speaking to you has the same goals, perspective, and learning style is the heart of a lot of frustration and communication issues.**

Scenario: Two very different views of feedback

- i. **Artisan 1:** the feedback method I like is very direct and focuses on problems first. The compliment heavy method annoys me to receive if I am trying to address flaws in my work and asked for specifics. If I want emotional support I will ask for it, if I ask for your feedback I want you to tear it to shreds so I can fix it.
- ii. **Artisan 2:** This is a project I have put a lot of time and effort into, and it's nerve-wracking just asking for feedback. If someone starts ripping my work apart immediately it's disheartening and makes me feel like I just shouldn't bother trying to do A&S. Soft suggestions mixed with support and validation encourage me to grow without causing stress and frustration.
- iii. **Teacher's perspective:** I barely know this person and I have no idea what type of feedback this person likes, so it feels like any response I make might upset them and make them mad at me or A&S.
- iv. **Lesson Learned:** You need to be proactive both as an artisan and as a teacher to identify what style of support and feedback is needed - just because this is the feedback style you prefer does not mean that is the default of the other person, and might actually really frustrate or hurt them. Also though, remember that feedback or questions that seem useless or mean to you might be that person's natural communication style, and not to assume meanness or a lack of caring just because it wasn't what you were looking for.

3. **The SCA has elements of both social interactions and education, which blurs the lines between social roles** - if a friend posts a short story they wrote on Facebook you wouldn't start making corrections, but if a student sends it to their teacher it's their job to make corrections. This unclear dynamic between student/teacher and social acquaintance in the SCA adds a serious measure of confusion in communication.

Scenario:

An artisan posts on Facebook, "I want to do x to enter a competition - should I?"

- i. **Teacher's perspective 1:** I want this person to have a great experience, and I know that the project as they describe it will not score well in that competition. They asked what I as an expert think, so I should warn them to consider something else, so they aren't blindsided/ frustrated if it scores poorly. It's my duty as a teacher to help them improve and do well.
- ii. **Teacher's perspective 2:** I don't think that project will score well, but that's something their laurel or mentor can address, not me as a friend. What's more important is that I make them feel excited about trying a competition and validate their capabilities. I will tell them "you can do it!"
- iii. **Artisan's perspective 1:** I'm nervous about trying A&S, so asking my friends for validation will give me the courage I need to try. I'm looking for emotional support from my friends to make me more confident.
- iv. **Artisan's perspective 2:** I'm debating if the project idea I have is going to make for an effective entry in this venue. Many of my friends are judges who know the standards for that competition and should be able to tell me if this is a good idea

or if I should rethink it. I'm looking for a genuine assessment from experts I know, and support and validation won't give me the things I need to improve.

- v. **Overall Lesson Learned:** All of these perspectives and needs are valid, but if artisan 1 is looking for friends to be supportive they will be hurt and frustrated with teacher 1 giving criticism, whereas artisan 2 might feel betrayed and hurt that teacher 2 didn't give the formal feedback artisan 2 was looking for. This blurred line between friends/teachers/mentors can cause confusion on all sides, so it's best to be more specific about what hat (supportive friend or instructive teacher) you are hoping to get from people when addressing groups (example: "A&S judges/former competitors, I'm entering this and wondering if x works well with the rubric?" vs "I'm rather nervous, tell me I can do this?")

4. Sometimes people might interact differently than you expect.

- a. People are people, everyone has bad days, and sometimes a person might interact differently than you expected. Often a person may be exhausted, dehydrated, out-socialized, or something that makes effective communication a challenge at the best of times. For example, by 4pm at the Pennsic A&S Display an artisan is lucky if they can still think straight, much less have a long conversation about sources. After judging for 4 hours a teacher might have their eyes glazing over and be unable to word anymore.
- Example:
1. Person B says that Person A was mean. "I asked to talk to her last event and she brushed me off and walked away!"
 2. In fact, Person A had a serious migraine and spent most of court lying down in the hall with a pillow over her head last event, she was probably in horrible pain and trying to not throw up at the time you talked to her.
- b. People can have a different cultural background, personal preference, or disability that makes them respond differently than you would assume - some people don't smile much, some make different levels of eye contact, some people prefer more or less personal space. A person who is a non-native English speaker might be more blunt/direct. Often women have been criticized as being "bitchy/cold" because they don't default to smiles much, but are very warm in how they treat people in other ways, so assuming someone is mean or cold just because they interact differently than you do is hurtful and can be very problematic.
- i. Example: Mistress Elena is autistic and when tired she forgets to make facial features or modulate her voice much, which makes people worried she's unhappy with them or upset at something, when it's really just how her face looks.
- c. **Lesson Learned:** While some people are always going to be rude, try to be understanding that they might have genuinely thought you wanted the response they gave, or might be dealing with something else making them distracted, or have an innate communication difference that is making them seem rude now.

Take a breath and try to look at it from their perspective, and be considerate when looking to engage with someone.

Consent in A&S

As shown in the examples above, communication is never exact, it can be unclear what types of feedback an artisan is consenting to receive, or what level of feedback a teacher is consenting to provide, and both are needed for a good dialog. Both artisans and teachers need to consent - sometimes a person isn't up for giving or receiving feedback, and that's ok! Here are some good ways to be more mindful about consent in your discussions.

- **Ask Explicit Questions!** This is probably the most important thing. As an artisan or a teacher, ask specific questions in a non-judgemental way - "what are your goals with this project? Do you have suggestions for how I could use my sources more effectively? What forms of feedback would be useful for you right now? Where can I find more period correct materials? What was your thought process behind this material/method/pattern? For teachers especially, this last one is an excellent way to phrase questions to artisans, because with all the new research coming out often there are new finds someone may be referencing that you might not know about; by starting with a question you might learn something new yourself!
- **Don't assume what's true for you is true for them.** As discussed before, different people have different goals and communication styles - if someone says they want to make their project "the best" and are asking for advice you still might need to ask for more specifics if you don't know the person well - do they want it to score well in a competition, or is it the sample for what they want to teach?
- **Be aware of power dynamics/expectations.** With members of polling orders especially, there can be power dynamics at play that may make an artisan feel obligated to continue with a conversation initiated by a member of a polling order that they are not interested in and might not feel comfortable ending. Member of polling orders should consider if the student is actively seeking out your advice? Are they continuing to engage with the conversation (asking specific questions versus giving non-answers)? In our excitement to help, we can sometimes forget that peer fear exists, and the stress around it can be real, so it's important to make sure we're not putting too much pressure to engage on someone who might not want it. As artisans, it can be easy to assume that laurels/experts are always "on" and available to talk. However, this is not always the case. People may not feel well or be exhausted. The imposter syndrome is also rampant, and teachers may feel obligated to help even when they are not in a good headspace for it, which can lead to many problems. Both parties should be consenting to the discussion, else it makes it much easier for miscommunications and frustrations to occur.

- **Consider the venue.** If we have a judge and an entrant in a competition there is a measure of assumed consent between them, but even still the entrant has agreed to be judged by the rules of that competition, so offering advice about what they should do next might not be something they are looking for or want. Again, asking questions about what the entrant is looking for can help. There is less assumed consent in a display. Someone displaying might be hoping to connect with others in their field, or they might simply be looking to show off something they are proud of, and that's valid too. Unless someone has explicitly invited you to give your feedback (or you have a pre-existing peer/mentor relationship they agreed to), they have not consented to receive your feedback, and you should stick to compliments, polite phrasing, asking if there is any feedback you can provide, or just don't engage.
- **Err on the side of caution, kindness, and understanding.** For teachers, it's often safer to give a more polite non-answer first ("that's lovely, how interesting, thank you for your perspective") and then ask if more explicit feedback is welcome/available than to start with more explicit ("I don't think that pattern is period/those sources are not good quality") and realize the person was looking for validation. Likewise try not to automatically assume that the teacher who said "x will probably not score well/y isn't documentable for this period" was being harsh or mean rather than genuinely trying to be helpful. While some people have their issues, trying to assume the best intentions and speaking with kindness and understanding leads to much more pleasant times in general.
- **Don't ask a question you only want one answer to.** Sometimes we might really hope someone will answer something a specific way - that yes, this project is perfect, that these materials are definitely period, they would love to read your notes/attend your class - but for this process to be done with consent we have to have to genuinely give people the option to say no.
 - **Example 1:** An artisan asks, "Is X a good idea/plan for an A&S project where I want to try to win A&S champs?" If you ask someone this question you have to be open to the idea that they may say no. You're asking for their opinion - you are free to disregard it, but you can't be upset at them for giving you their thoughts after you asked for them.
 - **Example 2:** "can I talk with you about my/your embroidery?" Artisans or teachers might be tired, busy, or anything that makes now not a good time. You are not owed someone else's time, no matter how frustrating that may feel.
 - **Example 3:** A teacher asks, "Do you want to come to my class/read my handout?" You might be an amazing teacher but you might not be what that artisan needs, so they don't really want your notes/lecture/advice. As humbling as it may feel, it's still a valid thing for them to say no to.

For it to be consent people also have to feel comfortable being able to say no, which means mitigating our own feelings around what someone might say and being aware of the

power dynamics. If you ask a question and receive an honest answer then it's not fair to be upset at the person for answering honestly, even if the answer is not what you were hoping for. You can mitigate this though by being more clear about what types of feedback you are looking for.

How to disengage politely:

While ideally folks will become more aware of these issues and will check more frequently for consent before discussions, in practice many people are still learning and internalizing this, and many still assume that how they like to give and receive feedback is universal. Here are some ways to disengage politely if you do not consent to conversing at that time.

Polite non-answers to statements/suggestions:

"That's certainly an interesting point/perspective."

"I will have to look into that."

"how interesting."

"Indeed."

Asking someone to disengage:

"I would love to talk about this, but I'm rather exhausted/have a headache and am not up to discussing this now."

"I'm a bit too brain-fried to discuss that so deeply, sorry."

"I'm sorry, I need to take a break and grab some water/use the restroom/take a nap so I can't look at your project now, thank you."

"My laurel/teacher/friend X is handling feedback for me if you would like to share it with them?" (you can always ask a non-peer to do this, or it can be a peer you aren't in fealty to but just collects feedback for you).

"I understand, but this isn't the type of feedback I'm looking for right now, but I appreciate the thought."

Asking to delay for the future:

"I am really interested in your thoughts, but I am exhausted. Could I email/FB message you about it this week?"

"This is awesome and I would be happy to help you, but I have to run to x, would you be free to chat about it before court/email me your documentation for review?"

Conclusion: Miscommunications happen all the time in our world and can never be entirely eliminated, especially in the SCA where we blur the lines between social acquaintances and student/teacher dynamics. However, we can try to mitigate hurt feelings and frustrations by ensuring that both parties understand the question being asked, are willing and able to discuss the matter then, and have the freedom and comfort to answer truthfully, and also by trying to look at our interactions with people with compassion and empathy.