Audio Description as a Collaborative and Reflexive Tool (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

With approximately six million people who are blind, between the ages of 16-75+ years of age in the U.S., audio description (AD) is one way to increase people with disabilities' access when visual images are involved (American Council of the Blind, 2019). Snyder (2014) described AD as a verbal description of a program (i.e., performing arts, films, cultural events). Furthermore, AD is distinct from an art label, photo caption, or an audio tour offering more than context, but actual description of the situation (Thomson, 2017). In some cases, AD is available at art and cultural museums. This paper imagines AD as a collaborative and reflexive tool for college artists, AD practitioners, blind communities, and gallery curators. This collaborative practice is important because the outcomes can increase shared access accountability, offer participating artists reflexivity, and increase the level of AD accuracy for people with visual impairments.

Keywords: audio description, art, campus art galleries, collaboration, access, Universal Design, blind/visual impairments

Audio description (AD) is a verbal description of an item, program, or event. As early as 1964, blind communities have advocated for AD, although the service was not the blind communities' highest priority. Then, in the early 70s, an academic at San Francisco State University started to do work with AD and theater performances. Nearly a decade later, pioneers Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl facilitated AD training to volunteers for the PBS series American Playhouse. Audio description was first included in a 2002 piece of legislation, when the major broadcasters would have to provide a minimum number of described programming due to the Federal Communications Commission (2002; Packer, Vizenor, & Miele, 2015).

Until recently, little research has been done on AD. Snyder (2014) wrote the first dissertation and later a comprehensive training manual on audio description which gives a historical overview of the practice as well as guidelines and practice activities. To further practitioners' professional development, Snyder annually facilitates the Audio Description Institute, a three-day intensive hands-on workshop where the manual is used as the primary textbook (American Council of the Blind, 2015). Scholar and AD consumer Georgina Kleege (2016, 2018) critically considered the practice and argued that AD could have more universal audiences beyond those who are blind or with visual impairments and envisions a future where the practice is done more collaboratively (i.e., artists, describer, and blind and low vision communities). For example, Cozendey and Costa (2016) examined how AD can be a learning tool for all students in a physics class; and Perego (2016) examined the tool with sighted viewers experiencing it with a film. Branje and Fels (2012) demonstrated how 12 people with little or no prior knowledge of AD participated in an AD training, and then created a description for a 20-minute TV show. Blind and low vision consumers of AD rated them, and nine out of twelve scored at least satisfactory or higher. This is important because it showed with some training, most people can produce AD at least satisfactory, if not better. Although there is little research in the area of AD, the current research is exploring teaching AD to "non-professionals" and broadening its audience. In parallel, Closed Captions were primarily meant for those who are d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and now hearing folks utilize Closed Captions (Griffin, 2015). Audio description has a similar potential for "eyes free" experiencing, which may result in greater access for all.

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Depiction of the Problem

One of the longstanding guiding principles for AD is the idea of being objective and not interpreting a scene or artwork (Packer et al., 2015; Snyder, 2014). Taking this into consideration as I was producing AD for some campus art exhibits, I wished I had access to the artists so I could "check" my work. Additionally, I found this practice to be lonely and isolating. I often sat in the gallery alone or viewed the images on my laptop by myself. I wondered how this could be more of a collaborative process, get confirmation by the artists, and share more equitably the time and labor production. Often when it comes to access, the burden is put on the person with the disability. From the social model and social justice model of disability, this unacceptable. The environment and/or the power dynamics is what should be changed.

Thus, I realized one possible solution for the problems was to collaborate with the participating artists. I could provide a brief tutorial of what audio description is, assist them with the writing, but ultimately the artists would write the descriptive text and voice the recording, too. Thus, AD could enhance the experience for everyone by hearing the artists. This act also supported the ideas of interdependence, self-determination, and empowerment – some values of feminism and disability (ARC of the United States, 2011; Sprague & Hayes, 2000).

Participant Demographics and Institutional Partners/Resources

For this practice brief, the case explored is an art exhibit at a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and ally (LGBTQIA) cultural center at a university. The case involved many people with various roles. They included the gallery curator, the participating artists, the audio describers/AD educators, and the blind and low vision community.

Gallery Curator

The gallery curator was also the director of the LGBTQI cultural center, at a large urban research university. The center has sibling cultural centers, which include the student disability resource center. The various centers often collaborate and exchange ideas to support the diverse student population and increase inclusion. The gallery curator was a White, non-disabled, cisgender female. Prior to the collaboration, she expressed she had little experience with AD, but was open to the practice.

Participating Artists

For this art exhibit, there were ten artists showing their work. They were students and community members (i.e., non-students) of various identities. The AD educators did not know their specific identities. However, during the process, one artist disclosed having a visual impairment. Very few of the artists were familiar with AD. Through the exhibit, the artists gained exposure from an opening reception, the exhibit's associated programs, and the potential to sell their work.

Audio Describers and Educators

There were two initial audio describers and educators. One person was a museum studies master's graduate student and also the graduate assistant for the LGBTQIA center. He provided an insider role which proved extremely beneficial (i.e., more time with the gallery curator, more time to focus on the exhibit). He identified as a cisgender, gay, non-disabled male. The other describer and educator also held an insider's relationship with the center, since they had previously worked at the center. They are a PhD candidate, in disability studies, and identified as a person with a disability (but not a visual impairment), a Vietnamese adoptee, bi/queer, gender non-conforming, cisgender female.

Blind and Low Vision Communities

Reflecting on the historical disability rights slogan, "Nothing about us without us," one of the audio describers reached out to some students and community members who they knew and were blind or have low vision for feedback on the collaborative process and the final AD of the exhibit (Charlton, 2000).

Gallery Space

The gallery space played a role in this endeavor. The space was approximately 10'x15' in a pie-like piece shape. It was located adjacent to the larger center's student community space where predominantly students drop in, study, socialize, and use the computers and printer. The gallery is free and open to the public during Monday-Thursday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. and Fridays, 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Sometimes the gallery space is used for meetings. Typically, the center organizes two to three exhibits all centering around the subject of gender identity, gender expression, and/or sexual orientation throughout the academic year. The space is physically accessible and located on street level near one of the main entrances. The building is near a bus and train stop, which increases pedestrian traffic.

Description of the Practice

Unlike previous experiences of doing AD with art galleries, the audio describers approached the gallery curator two months ahead of the Call for Artists. This allowed everyone involved as much lead time as possible and have the AD work be integrated as early as possible in the process. Even before the artists' selections were made, the audio describers/educators provided the gallery curator with a brief description about the collaboration and information about AD. The artists were invited to write their descriptive text independently, or with help (in person, by phone, or email). Most of them wrote the descriptive text with the AD educators and in-person. For example, the artists would write the initial draft and one of the audio describer/educators would review the text. The artists might be probed through open-ended questions, such as, "how would you describe the woman's dress color?" or "is this part important, because I notice you didn't describe it?" The artwork was present to be reviewed together. Then, if the artists wanted to and had the time, they voiced the descriptive text and the art label on a smartphone, which was familiar and easy to use. Ultimately, for each art piece the result was: (1) the descriptive text in a Word document for large print format and text online, (2) a recorded sound file voiced by the artist to be on a device, and (3) the audio file and image on Soundcloud.com, a free, audio cloud portal.

In the end, nine of the ten artists wrote their descriptive text for their art pieces. Then, five of them voiced the text they wrote. For those who did not write either the text or voice the text, one of the audio describer/educators completed the AD, and there was transparency to the exhibit audience in these instances who was speaking.

To be as inclusive as possible and have a variety of different means of access, there was the descriptive text available in hardcopy large print; text in a document online; the sound files uploaded to Soundcloud.com, a free, third-party cloud system; and lastly, the sound files uploaded on two iPod Nanos that people could use in the gallery space for free. The goal was to have different ways of access just in case there were Internet or technical difficulties. Ironically, even though the collaboration had begun early, finishing touches with the gallery art labels and the AD occurred one hour before the opening reception. However, in the end, all the artwork had audio description by the opening reception.

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

The idea of collaborating with others was a new and innovative idea. Often, audio describers take on all the labor to observe the art, write the descriptive texts, voice the text, and upload to a device or cloud system. Initially, one of the goals for this collaboration was to involve others to help share the labor and responsibility. This approach is similar to other work and experiences with diversity and inclusion issues. In other words, access, diversity, and inclusion should not be solely one person's or one unit's responsibility – diversity and inclusion should be shared and be part of institutional responsibility. Interestingly, regarding time- the audio describers believed they spent more time, than less.

Additionally, during the process, the audio describers/educators saw how the collaboration was beneficial as a reflexive tool for the artists involved. For example, while working with one artist and reviewing the descriptive text, the question was posed, "What about your main figure's dress?" The artists had not realized she had not described it. In this way, there is potential and an opportunity for artists to use audio description as a reflexive tool to re-examine their artwork. Similar to qualitative research work, art students could use reflexivity via AD. Furthermore, voicing the descriptive text can give them practice speaking aloud about their work. As the artists read the text aloud, they often "noticed" different things and would want to re-write and then re-record. On average, the artists made no more than three attempts to record their text.

After the AD process was completed, the audio describers/educators distributed a short, confidential, informal survey to the artists to get feedback on their experience. Seven of the nine artists completed the survey. Prior to the exhibit, about half of them were familiar with writing AD. Regarding writing and voicing the text, most of the artists thought the process took "longer than expected" and was "harder than they thought." Thinking about their future work in exhibits, most were "extremely likely" to ask future gallery curators about having audio description for the exhibits. Below are some feedback highlights:

Did writing and/or voicing the descriptive text have an impact on you?

- I feel more conscious of my work, and of creating visual descriptions in other spaces and online.
- Helped me to better understand my work and how to put in the effort to make it more acces-

sible. Very helpful!
- It made me feel happy because I love storytelling and I was very much telling the story of our piece for others to enjoy.
- I had to put myself in the place of visually impaired people to understand if my description would be effective or not. It expanded my knowledge of necessary accommodations that I was otherwise not familiar with.

Although most of the artists' experiences were positive, some artists commented,

- It was mildly frustrating.
- I am still doubtful as to why a blind person would want to attend a visual art show. Is there evidence that the blind are being underserved in this respect? Or was this a case of sighted people want to feel more politically correct? I suspect the latter, which makes the whole endeavor feel like a waste of time at best, and pretty unsavory at worst.

This last comment surprised the describers/educators. Furthermore, the artist's comment conveyed a cynical tone that this process was done to be "politically correct." After reflection, the AD educators recommended more education for future projects about why AD is necessary and the idea that blind and low vision communities do attend art and cultural events; this should be explained more to the artists.

Lastly, there was a survey feedback form in print and online for those who used the AD. However, no one submitted feedback. The AD educators did get feedback from a few people who were blind or low vision with positive remarks. After the AD was done, the describers organized a lunch and had them listen to the AD and got feedback – both on the content as well as the technical side.

Implications and Portability

Although this is a single case, there are possible implications and high portability of AD as a collaborative and reflexive tool. First, with the collaboration, there can be a dialogue and an exchange of thoughts and ideas between all parties involved (i.e., the gallery curator, artists, audio describers, and those who are blind or have low vision). Second, by having the artists write their own descriptive text, if they cross the line and give some artistic interpretation, it is okay, because it was their art. Third, by voicing the descriptive text, it gives all the exhibit guests the opportunity to hear the artists' voices and have a more intimate relationship to the artists and their work. Fourth, by doing the AD work proactively, people with visual impairments did not have to "ask for the accommodation at least one week in advance," which is the university's standard accommodations' practice. The burden was not put on the person with the disability, but shared by the center, audio describers, and the artists. Fifth, having digital images of the art work and then the audio files are another way to archive the entire exhibit. And in this case, some of the artists' voices would also be preserved. Lastly, although this gallery was open to this collaboration, their most recent exhibit this fall 2017 did not have AD. This shows the need for AD to become more ingrained in gallery and museum work standard practices rather than be one person's initiative. How can writing the descriptive text and producing the audio description become as necessary and standard as hanging the pieces of art or a beautiful display of wine and cheese? Clearly, this needs further research and discussion not only by academics, but with gallery and museum practitioners, museum studies students, and students and people with disabilities.

Audio description as a collaborative and reflexive tool is extremely portable to other campuses specifically for the visual arts. Whether the higher education institution has only one main art gallery or a few smaller galleries, the collaborative practice can be implemented with foresight and intention. There is little technical or required devices needed. The main components to the process are someone experienced with AD, a willing gallery curator, willing artists, and time. The success of the process is dependent on how the process is initiated (i.e., lead time, personal attitudes, and personal relationships), how much people understand and value access, diversity, and inclusion in the context of people with disabilities, and how open people are to new ideas and collaboration.

Concrete Suggestions

Here are some suggestions that may increase accessibility, more positive exhibit experiences for all, and increase diverse communities to more fully participate in arts and culture. Suggestions include:

1. Insert a line item in budget for AD work of at least 10%;
2. Train student interns on AD so they could help with the writing of descriptions and keep the process "in house" rather than a third-party vendor;
3. Connect and collaborate with a museum studies program; often, students have a capstone project or can receive internship credit;

4. During the Call for Submissions, when artists submit digital pieces of work, require them to submit a description;
5. Provide AD guidelines and "how to" sheets for artists submitting work;
6. Clearly communicate that AD is significant and necessary. The burden should not be placed on the person with a disability by having a friend or family member describe the art;
7. In social media and exhibit press releases, make sure to communicate that AD is available;
8. Have the descriptive text in many different forms for the guest; regularly test out any equipment or Internet links;
9. Connect, collaborate, and market exhibits with AD to the blind and low vision communities; additionally, the AD could be an "on the road" art exhibit bringing the sound files to their location; and.
10. Take the time to gather feedback from everyone involved – especially those who are most affected (i.e., blind and low vision communities).

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Elizabeth A. Thomson received their B.A. degree in sociology/anthropology and German from Lake Forest College, M.A. in women and gender studies from Roosevelt University, and is a Ph.D. candidate in disability studies, from University of Illinois at Chicago. Their 20+ years of experience includes working with a variety of underrepresented and marginalized student communities. They are currently the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Director of the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Intercultural Programs at the University of Minnesota Morris. Their research interest includes the new phenomenon of disability cultural centers in higher educations. They can be reached by email at: lthomson@uic.edu.