Teaching Audio Description: An On-Line Approach

Joel Snyder

Abstract:
In mid-2010, I created an on-line course in Audio Description (in addition to establishing America’s first ongoing college course in Audio Description, based at Montgomery College in Montgomery County, MD (suburban Washington, DC). Simultaneously, Dr. Francisco Lima (blind from birth) of the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (Recife, Brazil) was building a college-level on-line curriculum for the study of Audio Description. Aiming to contribute to Dr. Lima’s on-line audio-description course, this paper/multi-media presentation will focus on how my on-line course was developed, the challenges of building an engaging on-line audio description curriculum and the planning of each lesson. The session will emphasize the practicalities of teaching this material on-line and its application for the employment of audio describers. With the establishment of a mandate for description on broadcast description in the United States (and mandates at various stages of development in a range of countries), wider opportunities for employment exist and will increase—it suggests positive ramifications for training programs and the teaching of audio description worldwide.

In addition to contributing with Dr. Lima’s course, this paper also intends to establish the basis for a joint training sometime in the near future, when I will join Dr. Lima in Recife for an in-person presentation and review of student final exams/practica in audio description.

Key Words: audio description, blind, on-line course

1.1 - Introduction-Background

I was a part of the world’s first ongoing audio description service, developed in the Washington, DC area in 1981. Our small group of five or six taught ourselves what might work well as we considered how best to translate the visual images of live theater into words that might correspond appropriately and conjure images and meanings in the minds of our listeners. We worked under the guidance of Dr. Margaret Pfanstiehl, an educator

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President and Founder, Audio Description Associates
One of the first audio describers (c. 1981), Joel Snyder and Audio Description Associates develop audio description for media, museum tours, and performing arts worldwide. He has led a staff that produces description for nationally broadcast films and network series including “Sesame Street” broadcasts and DVDs. Internationally, he has introduced description techniques in over a dozen nations; in summer 2008, he presented papers on description in Montpellier, France; Shanghai, China; and provided description for the World Blind Union in Geneva. Visit www.audiodescribe.com for more information and work samples.
and blind woman who founded The Washington Ear, a closed-circuit radio-reading service (for which I read aloud the Washington Post and described its colorful Sunday comics).

1981. That was the year the first IBM PC was introduced. (A photo of an early DOS-based personal computer and keyboard/)

Bill Gates was only 26 years old. (A photo of a young Bill Gates, in profile and facing front: a “mug shot” after he was arrested in Albuquerque, New Mexico.)

And I had hair. (Two photos—Joel circa 1974 with a full, dark beard and a full head of hair, and Joel circa 2010 with a beard of white and gray and a bald pate.)

... 30 years ...

Three decades later, university-level audio description courses have been developed, principally in Europe. But most audio description efforts in local communities, in museums or for media have had their foundation in training by experienced describers sharing their observations.
Well into the digital era and the ubiquity of web-based training, the teaching of audio description founds its way on-line. In mid-2010, I created an on-line course in Audio Description (in addition to establishing America’s first ongoing college course in Audio Description, based at Montgomery College in Montgomery County, MD (suburban Washington, DC).

1.2 – Course Development

The development of this on-line effort involved the challenges of building an engaging on-line audio description curriculum and the planning of each lesson. I also emphasize the practicalities of teaching this material on-line and its application for the employment of audio describers: with the establishment of a mandate for description on broadcast description in the United States (and mandates at various stages of development in a range of countries), wider opportunities for employment exist and will increase—it suggests positive ramifications for training programs and the teaching of audio description worldwide.

After 30 years, audio description is still under-known—it lacks visibility, if you will. A sign interpreter’s work or captions and sub-titles are seen by all; audio description is accessed “invisibly”—only by the consumer of the service. The first step, then, is to provide a brief demonstration of what audio description is and how it can convey the visual image to people who are blind or have low vision—in America, these folks total over 25 million people.

I ask participants to listen to the soundtrack of an excerpt from a motion picture: no video is available and neither is audio description. The idea is to experience the film as a totally blind individual would experience it without the benefit of audio description. Try it - listen:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9O4VYUBEGY

What did you hear? Could you follow what was going on?

Would it make any difference if you hear that original soundtrack along with an audio description track? No video—you’re still blind. Try it this time:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9i3QSoNfTjU

Now, take a look at the video of the excerpt along with the original audio and the audio description. Does the description match the visual images that comprise the scenes? Would you choose the same visual elements to describe? What language choices would you make? Does the voicing of the description enhance an understanding of the scene? Look and listen:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0jOFbJTsnQ

This is the sort of practica that is available in an on-line course: participants view video excerpts that are made available via YouTube or other web-video services and the students can post their own description scripts for those excerpts, inviting comment from the instructor and other folks taking the course.

I also highlight a relatively new application for audio description—literacy. In several settings, I’ve experimented with developing more descriptive language to use when working
with small children and picture books or short videos. Picture books, of course, rely on pictures to tell the story. But the teacher trained in audio description techniques would never simply hold up a picture of a red ball and read the text:

(A photo of a red ball.)

“SEE THE BALL.”

He or she might add: "The ball is red--just like a fire engine. I think that ball is as large as one of you! It’s as round as the sun--a bright red circle or sphere." The teacher has introduced new vocabulary, invited comparisons, and used metaphor or simile--with toddlers! By using audio description, you make these books accessible to children who have low vision or are blind and help develop more sophisticated language skills for all kids.

A picture is worth 1000 words? Maybe. But the audio describer might say that a few well-chosen words can conjure vivid and lasting images.

1.3 – The Course

Let’s go forward to the beginning--here’s how my on-line course gets started:
(Three screen shots from the on-line course.)
Course Summary

Course: Audio Description: The Visual Made Verbal

Course Description

Audio Description (AD) is a literary art form. It's a type of poetry — a haiku. It provides a verbal version of the visual: the visual is made verbal, audio, and oral. Using succinct, vivid, and imaginative descriptors, you can convey the visual image that is not fully accessible to a significant segment of the population and not fully realized by the rest of us — the rest of us being sighted folks who see but who may not observe. Audio describers provide services in various multimedia settings, including theater, television, video, film, exhibits, museums, and educational venues — but also at circuses, rodeos, ice-skating exhibitions and myriad sports events.

There are 25.2 million Americans who are blind or have trouble seeing even with correction (American Foundation for the Blind, 2008).

For broadcast television, on film, videotape, and DVDs, AD enhances the regular program audio, precisely timed to occur only during the lulls between dialogue. On televised programs in the United States, it is accessed via a separate digital audio stream. In certain other countries, a set-top box provides access to the signal.

This unique course will introduce participants to the principles of description, how to produce quality description, and the importance of close communication with the “end users” — people who are blind or have low vision and all people who support this innovative use of technology to provide greater media access.

Course Outcomes

At the conclusion of the sessions, participants will know/understand:

- who are “the blind”?
- The History of Audio Description
- Active Seeing/Visual Literacy
- Developing skills in concentration and observation
- The art of “editing” what you see
- Using the spoken word to make meaning
- Using language to conjure images
- Using Audio Description in live theater productions, in video/film, with visual art exhibits, and on the web

Course Outline

Section 1
- Introduction
  - What is it and who it’s for
  - The History of Audio Description/ Audio Description and Literacy
  - What is Audio Description?
  - who are “the blind”?

Section 2
- The Fundamentals of Audio Description — Observational/Editing/Language/Vocal Skills
  - See by Listing
  - The art of “editing” what you see
  - Using language to conjure images
  - Vocal Skills

Section 3
- Where it’s practiced — still images
  - Using Audio Description in live theater productions, video/film, with visual art exhibits
  - Audio Description practice — still images

Section 4
- Audio Description practice — still images

Section 5
- Audio Description practice — video

Presentation of Final Exam
- The final exam will involve the development of and the live or recorded delivery of an audio description script for a half-hour video of your choosing.

Final Thoughts — Bonus Viewing
Throughout the course, it’s critical to include graphics or video. The example used earlier is an excerpt from *The Empire Strikes Back*. Early in the course, I focus on access awareness and sensitivity to attitudes that exist regarding people with disabilities, particularly people who are blind or have low vision. Here’s one screen in the course emphasizing these issues—

Finally, it’s so important to remember that there’s only a thin line between “ability” and “disability” – let’s rid ourselves of any semblance of “able-ism”, any sense of separateness between those who can see and those who cannot. “To be able” is a relative condition -- the great majority of Americans are only “Temporarily Able-Bodied” (TABs) anyway! One moment Christopher Reeve was “able-bodied”—the next minute, he wasn’t. But he was still Christopher Reeve.

(Two photos: one of Christopher Reeve in his movie persona of “Superman” and one of the smiling Reeve, bald with a tracheotomy.)
The body of the course details the “Fundamentals of Audio Description”, as put forward in an essay I wrote some years ago. The following screen is another example of graphics use, and one that features a video, this time in the section that focuses on the first fundamental of audio description, Observation.

Observation: We must learn how to see the world anew. In his book, "Seen/Unseen: A Guide to Active Seeing," the photographer, John Schaefer, coins the phrase "visual literacy." That's what describers need to nurture. Schaefer refers to the need to 'increase your level of awareness and become an active "see-er."' The best describers will truly notice all the visual elements that make up an event, just as Emily does in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town." Looking back from the grave, she sees for the first time: "I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Clocks ticking, Mama's sunflowers, food, coffee, new-ironed dresses, hot baths. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? Every, every minute?" The Stage Manager answers: "No. The Saints and Poets maybe, they do, some."

And effective Audio Describers!
(The FedEx logo in blue and red block letters, each abutting the other.)

What do you see? Look closely. Remember: labeling or naming is not the same as describing. The writer Paul Valery noted that “Seeing is forgetting the name of what one sees.” If we dismiss this image as “the logo of FedEx”, we fail to observe it—have you noticed the arrow between the “E” and the “x”?

This notion is exemplified by a short video produced by the City of London. Hint: forget what you’re supposed to be looking at and note everything that’s there—especially the image moving from right to left shortly after the video begins.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ahq6qcgoay4
The second fundamental of audio description is Editing. Audio describers must edit or cull from what they see, selecting what is most valid, what is most important, what is most critical to an understanding and appreciation of an event. Often, only a few precious seconds are available to convey those images. The American jurist, Oliver Wendell Holmes, reminds us that “The great struggle of art is to leave out all but the essential.”

Sometimes describers must convey with words extremely complex images, typified here by Velazquez’ “Las Meninas”.
(A photo of Velazquez' painting.)

Describers must ask themselves “What is most critical to an understanding (he points to his head) and an appreciation (his hand is on his heart) of the image?” Description is often about what NOT to describe. The on-line course allows participants to discuss with others their views in the on-line discussion room.

The third fundamental of audio description is Language. We translate it all into words--objective, vivid, specific, imaginatively drawn words, phrases, and metaphors. For instance, how many different words can you use to describe someone moving along a sidewalk? Why say “walk” why you can more vividly describe the action with “sashay,” “stroll,” “skip,” “stumble,” or “saunter”? Is the Washington Monument 555 feet tall or is it as high as fifty elephants stacked one on top of the other or two football fields atop each other?
(A photo of the Washington Monument.)
I stress throughout the course that “less is more” and reference others writers that emphasize this concept: Blaise Pascal says it so succinctly and so well with his “I have only made this letter longer because I have not had the time to make it shorter”—and Williams Ivins in his Print and Visual Communication cautions against the “prolix rigamarole” of overly wordy description. The on-line course provides a link to the books cited so folks can find out more information about the reference or even purchase a copy of the book cited.

And finally—my fourth fundamental of audio description is Vocal Skills. We make meaning with our voices. In the on-line course, I stress the importance of clear speech and nuanced oral interpretation.

(A photo of a child, her tongue extended and curled up to reach her nose.)

Participants can practice tongue twisters like this one –

“Are you copper-bottoming them, my man?” “No, I’m aluminumg ’em, mum.”

and even hear me demonstrate for them—

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNlx3YQ4uvC

As for oral interpretation, I ask students to change meaning just with their voices—

WOMAN WITHOUT HER MAN IS A SAVAGE

Voiced alternatively will yield:
WOMAN: WITHOUT HER, MAN IS A SAVAGE

Or simply make sense out of the seemingly nonsensical.

THAT THAT IS IS THAT THAT IS NOT IS NOT

The sense-making version:

THAT THAT IS, IS; THAT THAT IS NOT, IS NOT

Finally, and as noted earlier, there’s plenty of practica with video as well as still images. How would you succinctly describe this image? (A black-and-white photo of Lauren McDevitt.)

After analysis of various descriptive phrases, I offer one of my own:

“Backlit, and in wispy silhouette, a photo of a white girl in her teens in profile, facing right — only inches away, a horse (his head, the size of her torso) nuzzles her open hand in her lap as she rests in a wheelchair.”

And a video excerpt is analyzed as well:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LV9tokcHTuQ

An annotated version of the audio description script for this excerpt from the feature film *The Color of Paradise* is provided on-line for review:

NOTE: Cues in CAPS; descriptions preceded by “>>.” Annotations are in bold at right, keyed to numerals in description text. The appearance of the character “Mohammed” is described earlier in the film.

1 01:01:36:12 00:00:10:26 --:--:--:--
>> Mohammed kneels and taps his hands through the thick ground cover of brown 1.

1 – Color has been shown to be
curled leaves.

important to people with low vision, even people who are congenitally blind.

2 – Timing is critical in the crafting of description. We weave descriptive language around a film’s sound elements.

3. – Vivid verbs help images in the mind’s eye.

2 01:01:46:16 00:00:00:23 --:--:--
...[CHIRPING/RUSTLING :02]

3 01:01:48:16 00:00:04:04 --:--:--
>> A scrawny nestling struggles on the ground near Mohammed's hand.

4 01:01:52:19 00:00:00:23 --:--:--
...[GASP/CHIRPING :02] 2.

5 01:01:54:19 00:00:15:00 --:--:--
>> His palm hovers above the baby bird. He lays his hand lightly over the tiny creature. Smiling, Mohammed curls his fingers around the chick and scoops it into conjure his hands. He stands and strokes its nearly featherless head with a fingertip.

6 01:02:08:12 00:00:00:23 --:--:--
...[CHIRPING/RUSTLE :01]

7 01:02:09:12 00:00:17:19 --:--:--
>> Mohammed starts as the bird nips his finger. He taps his finger on the chick's gaping beak. He tilts his head back, then drops it forward. Mohammed tips the chick into his front shirt pocket. Wrapping his legs and arms around a tree trunk,

4. – Description, like much poetry, is written to be heard. Alliteration adds variety and helps to maintain interest.
Mohammed climbs.

8  01:02:28:10  00:00:01:04 --:--:--:--
...[HEAVY BREATHING/CLIMBING :11]

9  01:02:39:10  00:00:17:19 --:--:--:--
>> He latches onto a tangle of thin, upper branches. His legs flail for a foothold. Mohammed stretches an arm between a fork in the trunk of the tree and wedges in his head and shoulder. His shoes slip on the rough bark.

**Note:** Throughout this excerpt, for the most part, descriptions are written to be read “in real time,” i.e., as the action being described occurs on screen. However, in many films descriptions may precede the action on occasion. This is a useful convention – it accommodates timing required in films with a great deal of dialogue and allows description users the opportunity to know “what happened” moments before the action occurs.

10  01:02:55:11  00:00:00:23 --:--:--:--
...[SCRAPING :03]

11  01:02:58:11  00:00:16:04 --:--:--:--
>> He wraps his legs around the lower trunk, then uses his arms to pull himself higher. He rises into thicker foliage and holds onto tangles of smaller branches. Gaining his footing, Mohammed stands upright and cocks his head to one side.

12  01:03:13:20  00:00:01:04 --:--:--:--
...[CHIRPING/FLUTTER]
>> An adult bird flies from a nearby branch. 5. Mohammed extends an open hand. He touches a branch and runs his fingers over wide, green leaves.

14 01:03:27:11 00:00:00:23 --:--:--:--

...[RUSTLING :03]

15 01:03:30:11 00:00:14:08 --:--:--:--

>> He pats his hand down the length of the branch. His fingers trace the smooth bark of the upper branches, search the network of connecting tree limbs, and discover their joints.

16 01:03:43:20 00:00:00:23 --:--:--:--

...[RUSTLE :02]

17 01:03:45:20 00:00:05:06 01:03:50:26

>> Above his head, Mohammed's fingers find a dense mass of woven twigs—a bird's nest.

18 01:03:50:26 00:00:00:23 --:--:--:--

...[CHIRPING :03]

19 01:03:53:26 00:00:07:15 --:--:--:--

>> Smiling, he removes the chick from his shirt pocket and drops it gently into the nest beside another fledgling.

5 – What to include? This image is important—the adult bird returns in the next scene.
>> He rubs the top of the chick's head with his index 6. Mohammed wiggles his finger like a worm 7. and taps a chick's open beak. Smiling, he slowly lowers his hand.

6 – Be specific-- precision creates images!

7 – Similes paint pictures!

1.4 – Conclusion

We have an immense and varied culture in the United States—the same is surely true for many other countries around the world. There is no reason why a person with a visual disability must also be culturally disadvantaged. All people need to be full participants in their nation's cultural life and that goal can be achieved through greater access to film, television, theater, museums, and other cultural venues. With a focus on people's abilities, we will come much closer to greater inclusion and total access; and when people are more engaged with their culture they become engaging individuals—and more employable. In these days of 70% unemployment for people who are blind in the United States, improvement in this area could be the most important effect of more meaningful cultural access.

I encourage you to join me for an on-line review of audio description. It's available at the following URL – and it's free!

www.fracturedatlas.org/u

Note: “Fractured U.” was created by Fractured Atlas to address the emerging needs of artists and arts managers in a “DIY” environment.
Bibliography


