Implementing Audio Description with a Campus Art Gallery:   
Accessibility, Collaboration, and Dialogue

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**BACKGROUND**

Approximately 2% of people in the U.S., ages 16-75 years old are blind or have low vision. In Illinois, there are about 255,000 people with a visual impairment (ACS, 2014). One tool to increase accessibility and inclusion for them is audio description (AD), descriptive text that is then voiced. The primary guideline for AD is to “say what you see” by being concise, objective, and using vivid language (Snyder, 2014). This project was informed by both the social  (Oliver, 1990) and social justice models of disability (Castenada & Peters, 2000; Evans et al, 2017).

**OVERVIEW OF THE ACTIVITY**

The Gender and Sexuality Center (GSC) is one of the seven Centers for Cultural Understanding and Social Change at UIC. The center regularly curates art exhibits that are free and open to the public. Thomson and Kelley collaborated with the GSC for the Fall 2016  Sam Kirk exhibit *The Pursuit of Happiness* and the Spring 2017 multi-artist */ SANCTUARY /* exhibit. We used the dialogue process in new meaning making and understanding.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

**Collaboration Theory**

We engaged Gajda’s (2003) principles of collaboration theory to guide this project. The five principles are:

1. Collaboration is an imperative.
2. Collaboration is known by many names.
3. Collaboration is a journey not a destination.
4. With collaboration, the personal is as important as the procedural.
5. Collaboration develops in stages.

**Dialogue Process**

Kelley and Thomson used the characteristics of dialogue based off of the University of Michigan’s Intergroup Relations. During this collaboration, we practiced 1) suspending our judgments, 2) using deep listening, 3) having reflection and inquiry, and 4) identifying assumptions (Bohm, 1992).

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. How is **collaboration** **experienced** by two graduate students in different academic fields trying to implement audio description?

2. What challenges and benefits were experienced by **artists’ involvement** in the audio description process?

1. What **innovative strategies** were implemented to create a better experience of audio description for everyone?

**LEARNING MOMENTS**

**Collaboration Experiences**

* Challenges
  + Being accountable to each other
  + Time and labor
  + Differences in styles
* Benefits
  + Having a partner and supporter
  + Being interdisciplinary
  + Brainstorming new ideas and trusting to challenge/modify problematic ideas

**Artists’ Involvement in Process**

* Challenges
  + Coordination with artists
  + Need for more time and space
  + Educating them about audio description
  + Did not get 100% participation by artists
* Benefits
  + Gained deeper insight about the art
  + Confirmed text with the artists
  + Increased sense of teamwork by curators, Thomson and Kelley, and artists

**Innovative Strategies Implemented**

Sam Kirk exhibit

* Invited MUSE students to assist
* Posted as single audio file to Soundcloud
* Included interview with artist
* Feedback from blind/low vision communities

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* Incorporated artists in process from beginning
* Included artists’ voices & thick descriptions
* Posted as playlist to Soundcloud
* Co-curricular project for professors

**TAKEAWAYS**

First, we hope that more campus exhibition spaces will integrate AD in their regular standard of practice, not only to be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act 1990, but to enhance all of their guests’ experiences.

Second, we believe there are benefits for the exhibit curators to collaborate with the participating artist(s), audio describers, and those with visual impairments. This offered a deeper and more critical engagement with the art.

Third, working with people with disabilities is crucial and affirms - “nothing about us without us” (Charlton, 2000). They should be consulted at every step and in leadership positions.

Implementing audio description will be different in every space. It is contextual and cultural. However, it is the hope that some part of our experiences can implement audio description at other campus exhibition spaces.

**REFERENCES**

See References document.

**Description of Graphic**

Three horizontal rectangles in light, medium, and dark blue, in descending order and nestled within each other. They depict Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3. To the left, a rectangle labeled Pre-Phase: Literature Review, Blind and Low Vision Communities, and Feedback from *The Pursuit of Happiness*.

Phase 1: Gender and Sexuality Center; Kelley and Thomson

Phase 2: Gender and Sexuality Center, Kelley and Thomson, and artists

Phase 3: Audio Description, Guests, and Blind and Low Vision Communities

**CONTACT INFORMATION**

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**Audio Description Handout**

Audio Description – the process of transforming something visual to the verbal so that it is heard by someone; primarily an accommodation for blind or low vision, but other informal benefits are being researched; also known as narrative description, audio narration, video description, and visual description



**Various Disability Models**

We used the following three disability models.

* Minority Group Model – disabled people are seen as a minority group; similar to an ethnic, gender, or sexual minority; belief that oppression will be eliminated by attaining civil rights (Hahn, 1996)
* Social Model – the environment or society is the barrier for disabled people; the environment should change, not the person (Oliver, 1990)
* Social Justice Model – recognizes privilege and oppression; examines ableism; acknowledges the diversity within the disability community; emphasizes identity intersectionality; has an educational component (Evans, et al, 2017; Mingus, 2010)

These three models are in stark contrast to the Medical Model (i.e., person is deficient and should be “fixed;” privileges the medical staff person’s knowledge) and the Religious/Moral Model (i.e., the disability is the result of one’s sins or past negative behaviors).

**Language**

Language is important and often communicates people’s attitudes and beliefs. In the disability community and referring to the disability community, people (both disabled and non-disabled) have strong opinions about the use various words and phrases.

* People First Language – emphasizes the person first, then the disability; ex. She is a person who is blind (thearc.org)
* Identity First Language – places the identity first; framed as a positive identity factor; blind/blindness is not a negative word; ex. She is a blind person (Brown, 2011)
* Visual Impairment or Visual Disability – These terms can also be used as umbrella terms; used by the American Council of the Blind

**Audio Description Guidelines**

From (Kleege, 2016; Snyder, 2014)

* Go from general to specific
* Use color
* Use directional information
* Be clear, concise, and conversational (accessible language)
* Use metaphors or similes
* Be mindful of adverbs, which usually equals interpretation
* Aim for objectivity
* Prioritize the most essential (who, what, when, where)
* Acknowledge your own sighted privilege
* Consult people who are blind or have low vision as AD specialists
* Consider race, ethnicity, and skin color
* Don’t use whiteness as a default; describe everyone in image

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