Making Pictures Talk: The Journey of Learning a New Genre

By Sarah M. Lushia

"Audio descriptions? Is that really its own genre?" I still remember thinking this as Kathleen Lonbom, a librarian at Illinois State University's Milner library, told me excitedly about new grant-funded project she'd begun working on to digitalize the massive International Collection of Child Art (ICCA), which is housed and cared for by Milner. I had heard her talk about her involvement with this collection and her desire to digitalize it several times, yet I had little idea what she meant by the "audio descriptions" she kept referring to. I felt like I imagine many writers feel when they are first introduced to a new genre—I had no idea what Kathleen was talking about, and initially, I felt too embarrassed to ask her. Eventually, though, I did inquire about how audio descriptions worked and what writing in the genre entailed.

Through conversations with Kathleen, I began to learn about this genre. I discovered that audio descriptions were concise descriptions of visual images, which were created to enable those with vision impairment to have access to visuals such as those in the ICCA. I was fascinated. It made complete sense that describing visuals to those
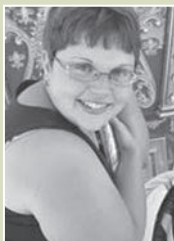
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with vision impairment was an important thing to do. As a visual learner I fully understand how vital visuals are to learning, understanding, and retaining information. If visually impaired persons did not have ways through which to access the visuals, they would lose access to a whole mode of communication. Yet it had never occurred to me that a unique genre that had been created to do just this. As someone who has always advocated for the use of visuals and images in all levels of education, I began to get really excited at the prospect of learning more about writing in this genre.

Kathleen had learned about audio descriptions due to a new requirement that government-funded digitalization projects must be made accessible to those with vision impairment. This meant that collections like the ICCA, which contains thousand of images, would likely no longer be eligible for these government-funded grants since it would be near to impossible for the small groups of people who generally work on such projects to create audio descriptions for pieces this numerous. While Kathleen's project had, luckily, already been grandfathered in, this had not stopped her from thinking about the possibility of how this new requirement would impact future grant projects. She had already started to think through some options, one of which was the possibility of tapping into the undergraduate student body to help create audio descriptions. This gave me further motivation to learn how to write in this genre because immediately I envisioned collaborating with Kathleen in my English 101 classes to teach this genre to my students, and potentially engage them in helping to create audio descriptions that Kathleen could use in the ICCA. Kathleen and I had worked together for many years, and a collaborative project in English 101 seemed a natural outcome of our previous work together. I suggested to Kathleen that I create a pilot project for my classes for the Fall 2009 semester to attempt to teach the audio description genre, and if that went well, we could teach it again in the Spring 2010, focusing more closely on the ICCA, and offering students the opportunity to publish their audio descriptions on the Milner website. Kathleen agreed to work with me and my students, and my journey to learning this new genre began.

My first task in this journey was to figure out for myself how to write an audio description. Kathleen suggested I explore the following websites to learn more about audio descriptions: Online Accessibility Training from Art Education for the Blind, *http://www.artbeyondsight.org/handbook/acs-verbalsamples.shtml* and Audio Description Illinois, *http://www.alsaudioillinois.net/.* These websites offer guidelines for the genre as well as plenty of samples and examples. After exploring these sites, I made a list of genre expectations for audio descriptions. These expectations were:

1. Use standard Times New Roman font.

2. The body of the description should focus exclusively on what you see when looking at the image.

3. The description should be short (average of about 2 minutes when read aloud).

4. A thumbnail of the image should appear above the written text.

5. The first sentence of the description follows a standardized format, containing the title of the piece, the artist, the medium, dimensions, and the date and location of creation.

6. Cohesion, organization, and readability are vital to successfully write in this genre.

7. Attention to detail, especially colors, placement, and size are necessary to give the reader/listener the ability to make sense of the description.

8. Additional information about the artist or the event being portrayed is sometimes given at the end of the audio description.

9. The description includes both general statements about what can be seen in the image as well as specific details.

Based on this initial understanding, I began to explore writing in this genre. Unlike any other genre I'd ever learned, my primary purpose for learning about audio descriptions was to teach my students about the genre. This changed both how I learned about the genre and what I focused on as I gained knowledge. It forced me to think beyond my own personal writing process and struggles to how these same struggles might affect other writers as they too learned this genre. For example, as I tried writing audio descriptions myself, one of the first things I noticed about writing them was that not having background information about or familiarity with the image I was trying to describe made the act of describing the image much more difficult. I quickly learned that for each image there was some aspect of the image for which I needed more information to feel as though I had authority as a writer. For instance, when I tried to describe an advertisement for skateboards I had a lot of difficulty because I was unfamiliar with skateboard terminology. After visiting several skateboarding websites I picked up some terminology such as "treks" and "grind" which allowed me to more accurately describe the skateboard advertisement. Not only did this teach me a step that would be necessary in my own process of writing audio descriptions since I was learning this genre both as a writer and a future teacher of the genre, it also made me aware that other writers, such as my students, would also likely need to engage in this type of background, authority-building research as part of their own process when writing audio descriptions.

While I felt like I had learned a great deal about audio descriptions prior to attempting to teach the genre to other writers, teaching this project for the first time taught me so much more. Throughout this process, my students and I learned together. In the spirit of true collaboration and due to my own writerly insecurities that I perhaps still did not understand this genre well enough to teach it, I scheduled my classes to meet at Milner for the first class period of this project and asked Kathleen to co-teach the introduction to the genre. As Kathleen and I described the project and the expectations of the genre, the air was tinged with a mixture of excitement, anxiety, and fear of the unknown. Not a single student in the class had heard of this genre before. I had learned some about the genre but was still very much a novice. And while Kathleen had the most experience as a writer in this genre, this was her first attempt to guide a class of English 101 students and their instructor through the process of writing audio descriptions. Every person in the room had some reason to feel at least a twinge of anxiety or fear. What pleasantly surprised me was that everyone also seemed to have some degree of excitement about this project and the challenge of writing an audio description. When students began to ask questions about the genre, almost immediately I realized how much I still needed to learn about this genre both as a writer and as a teacher. Many of the questions that my students were raising as they considered this genre as writers were focused on aspects of the genre that I had yet to learn or even consider. Thankfully, Kathleen answered their questions, and simultaneously taught all of us more about this genre and lent us insight into how we could become better writers within the genre. Some of the questions students asked that I hadn't yet considered included "How do you describe color to a blind person who has never seen color?" and "How do you describe action?" Kathleen explained in response to the first question that many of the people who use audio descriptions do or have had some degree of vision, and so they had experience seeing colors for themselves. And I suggested that those members of the audience who were born blind have figured out ways of knowing color through their other senses. In terms of describing action, Kathleen shared with us that by explaining the position of people and objects—such as "the man's feet are up off the floor and holds a basketball above his head"—you can give the audience access to this action and the narrative that goes with it.

Leaving the library that day, I was confident that all the writers in the class, including me, had a much stronger grasp of the audio description genre than we'd had prior to talking with Kathleen. While this was true, some questions still arose in the classroom as my students and I worked on writing audio descriptions that caught me off guard as both a teacher and a writer. For instance, a student who was doing an audio description of a sculpture that was in a permanent outdoor installation in New York City asked me if she should focus just on the sculpture or on the entire image—which included skyscrapers, cabs, cars, a subway entrance and numerous people. Since I was not sure of the answer, we thought about this together for a while and listened to a few more audio descriptions

from the websites that Kathleen had provided us. What both of us noticed was that while each audio description tended to focus on specific parts of an image in detail, all of them included at least brief mention of the entire contents of the image. So together we learned that yes, she should be describing the whole image, including what surrounded the sculpture. This decision ended up strengthening her description, as she was able to use some of the surrounding details to help her describe the sculpture, such as when she described the height of the sculpture in relation to the height of the people standing near it. It also taught me yet another important idea about both writing audio descriptions and teaching the genre to others.

As we navigated this genre together, my students and I co-created knowledge about this genre and what writing within this genre entails. Since everyone, including me, was a relative novice in this genre, the boundaries between "teacher" and "student" were more often challenged and authority more easily shared within this project. We were all writers being faced with the daunting challenge of learning to write in a new way. I was not the experienced writer passing along what I knew to others. I was instead another person in this learning community who was struggling with and often frustrated by elements of this genre such as its short length and rather rigid structure. I learned as much about this genre during the course of this project as any other writer in the class. This taught me a lesson about the importance of coming to my writing classes as a *writer* who also happens to be a teacher rather than as an instructor *of* writing.

By the time I taught audio descriptions again to the students in my Spring English 101 courses, I felt as though I had gained a much deeper grasp of this genre through my own journey attempting to write within it and through having read and responded to many other audio descriptions that were created in the fall. Also, by the spring, Kathleen was able to give me a detailed set of instructions for how to compose an audio description, complete with examples. These directions helped clarify this genre for me and gave me a sort of template that I could offer my students as a starting point as they became writers in this genre. With this template in hand, I wrote a new set of expectations for writing in the audio description genre. This set of expectations was much more detailed than my first attempt had been and reflected my growth as a writer learning/understanding a new genre. This set of forum expectations for audio descriptions included the following:

1. The description has four parts: introduction, overview, details, and publication note.

2. The introduction is short, usually a single sentence and includes the title of the image, artist, location/date of creation, and dimensions of the piece.

3. The overview consists of 2–3 sentences which give a general description of the overall image. These sentences are intended to help orient the listener.

4. The details section is the longest part of the piece. It includes sentences which give specific details about objects within the image such as color, location, and motion.

5. The publication note is a single, standard sentence which includes the publisher/holder of the image and the current location of the image.

6. Transitioning between the introduction, overview, details, and publication note was essential to creating overall unity and cohesion in the description.

7. Scripts for the description should use 14 pt Times New Roman font.

8. Scripts should be double spaced (to allow for last minute changes in the recording booth).

9. The title of image is italicized.

10. Any artist comments that are included in the description should be in quotes.

11. Description scripts are generally not longer than two pages in length, and take an average of 2 minutes to read aloud.

12. Description scripts must include a thumbnail of the image, centered, above the text.

13. If the image has in identifier number (as ICCA images do) it should appear in bold, left justified font prior to the thumbnail of the image.

14. Effective sentence-level transitions and easily readable word combinations and phrases are vital to overall "readability" and success in this genre.

15. Not everything needs to be described in detail.

16. Your description should be organized in a logical order, following some pattern within the image.

17. You should use clear and concise language so it can be easily understood by a listener.

18. You must choose whether you are describing the image from the point of view of the viewer or from the point of view of a person within the image. Once you make this choice be consistent—especially with things like to the left/right so the listener can follow where specific details are within the larger image.

19. Audio descriptions are ultimately an oral genre. Be sure to read drafts aloud and have them read to you. Change words/phrases that are hard to read/hear or difficult to follow when hearing the piece read aloud.

As my own knowledge about and understanding of this genre grew, I knew that teaching it to students would be less stressful than it had been when I initially was learning the genre in the fall. During the Spring semester, I began the project by sharing the instructions and examples Kathleen had given me with my students. The combination of having a concrete set of basic instructions along with my heightened ability to answer questions with confidence gave the project a solid start. Students seemed excited to learn a new genre and to my delight, many of them chose to work with pieces from the ICCA collection. Since my own understanding of how to write in the genre had grown immensely since the first time I'd taught this genre, I was also able to provide stronger feedback to writers. Instead of general feedback as I had given in the fall such as "You need to find a way to organize your sentences so the ideas in the sentences make logical sense when someone hears them read aloud," I was able to be more specific by saying instead, "Since there are a lot of objects in the image, if you tell the reader that you are beginning in the bottom left hand corner and working clockwise around the image (which is the way the eye tends to move in images in the West), you can lead your audience through the many objects without overwhelming them or confusing them since there will be a logical order."

Teaching a new genre to other writes while learning to write in it myself caused me to be more conscious and aware of the details/expectations of this genre than I normally am when learning to write in a new genre. It also allowed me to add students' questions to my own inquiries, expediting the rate at which I understood this genre. Additionally, my students, drafts and attempts to write in this genre also gave me a massive pool of samples at all levels of development, skill, and quality through which to view this genre that have not been available to me when I have learned other genres in different situations. As a result, for me, this method of learning to write in a new genre has been the most effective, fascinating, and enjoyable method.