



Module 4

Unit 2: Museums

Core video transcript

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Transcript

Slide 1

This is Chris Taylor from the University of Trieste, and in this video from the ADLAB PRO project I will be discussing all the various types of museum and the preparation for providing audio description access. This is Unit 2 (Museums) in Module 4 (Semi-live or recorded AD for static arts and environments).

Slide 2

One museum definition is, and I quote from the Merriam Webster dictionary: “an institution devoted to the procurement, care, study, and display of objects of lasting interest or value”.

Slide 3

Of the different types of museum, some contain only works of 2D and 3D art and are more accurately described as art galleries e.g., The Uffizi in Florence, the National Gallery in London. The contents of art galleries range from the Mona Lisa in The Louvre to also the works of local artists in small local museums.

Slide 4

Other museums can contain an enormous range of artefacts from natural history to toys to agricultural implements to...so on.

Slide 5

These latter museums include natural history museums, science museums, general interest museums, specific interest museums. For example, local museums such as The Fan Museum in Greenwich or the Museo dell'arte fabbrile e delle coltellerie (Museum of manufacturing art) in Maniago, Italy can contain any amount and any kind of artefact. In these cases, it is very useful to study a general introduction to the museum, if it exists.

Slide 6

Museums which more closely conform to the definition given in Slide 2 contain both artistic works and general cultural artefacts and these can be famous such as the Metropolitan Museum in New York, or the Louvre in Paris, but also many local museums. And all may need audio describing.

Slide 7

Audio description has now moved on and out, not only to museums, but also to the description of buildings and other architectural works. These range from the old (ancient ruins, medieval cathedrals, Town Halls, etc.) to the modern (The Guggenheim Museum in New York, The Shard in London). A basic knowledge of well-known architectural works and lesser known ones, that is the ability to recognise them, is required.

Slide 8

Going back to museums, over the years, and particularly more recently, many museums have been undergoing a transformation.

The old image of the museum as dusty rooms and boring content housing ancient vases with incomprehensible captions, has been rapidly changing.

The present 'hands on' approach in many museums and the more imaginative presentation of exhibits has made such institutions more attractive and to a wider public.

Slide 9

A contemporary museum contains not only artefacts, but rather a series of ideas, situations, relations, questions and solved and unsolved problems. This is part of an inexorable rise in *hybridity* and *complexity*. The key words here, hybridity and complexity, explain the concept of the modern museum, both at national and local level.

Slide 10

The various facets of the modern museum show the distance travelled over recent years in the modernisation of the image. Museums are a

- Store of artefacts and collections;
- Site for tourism;
- Place of research.

4

Slide 11

Museums are also

- Places of entertainment and education (edutainment);
- Places of promotion and merchandising;
- Places of SERVICE – access for disabled.

So, in addition to the lively presentation of the exhibits, the educational component, the merchandising of postcards, posters and other paraphernalia, many museums now take seriously the question of access for the disabled.

Slide 12

Various services are available to the sighted patron:

Guidebooks, audioguides, guided tours PLUS AD;

Technological advance e.g. 3D productions, special effects;

Educational programmes/lectures/courses;

Slide 13

Other aspects include club activities and the production and sale of publications. In addition to these services, access for the disabled is often provided in the form of ramps for wheelchairs and sign-language guides for the deaf, but also audio description and touch tours for the blind and sight-impaired, which is our main interest here.

Slide 14

More and more people, including children, are visiting museums as part of a day out. They now have a mental model of what a museum can offer which greatly transcends that of the 'dusty and boring' mentioned before. They expect elements of social aggregation, civil awareness, interaction.

Slide 15

So with this knowledge of what museums are, and what they have become, we can now think about how to provide access for patrons with sight loss (PSLs). Now that we have discussed different types of art, architecture and landmarks, and now that we are able to recognise different types of museum and understand how the museum experience has changed and is still changing. The first question to consider is what kind of access to provide. People with sight loss are in fact very varied, ranging from the totally blind from birth,

those who are totally blind through illness, age or accident, and the many stages of sight loss. Each of these may need a different approach.

Slide 16

Captions written in Braille is a first option, and encouraged by educators of the PSLs, but unfortunately only a minority are competent in reading Braille.

Slide 17

Large-letter documentation is an option for the slightly sight-impaired but only gives access to the captions or written guides, and is certainly not practical for later stages of blindness.

Slide 18

In or these reasons, audio description (AD) would seem to be the best option for most blind patrons and this is the service we shall focus on. AD can be helpful to patrons at whatever level of blindness, and also to other users such as language learners, those with learning difficulties, and even to sighted users seeking a more detailed description.

6

Slide 19

AD can also be very effectively used in conjunction with tactile exploration where the visitor is allowed to touch exhibits, or models of those exhibits if the material is vulnerable. Sculptures clearly lend themselves to this approach but paintings can also be made available in relief form.

Slide 20

It must be pointed out, however, that tactile exploration, that can become a

‘tactile tour’ of a whole museum, needs to be accompanied by a spoken audio description of some kind.

Slide 21

I quote “In the absence of sight, speech is essential to the integration of sensory input and therefore to perception.

Speech is an effective replacement for directly experienced visual input” (Louise Fryer).

The AD may be made available as a recorded audio-guide, if it is not possible to have the assistance of a human guide experienced in this kind of description, and this may suffice for some patrons with sight loss, but the assisted AD version is much more useful for those with serious sight loss. For example the Anteros Museum in Bologna, which creates plaster relief versions of paintings, also provides a spoken accompaniment by an expert guide. The guide can also help the patron navigate the painting by carefully positioning the hands.

7

Slide 22

Many museums have audio-guides for the sighted patron but not an AD version. The former can be of some help to blind patrons but, as we shall discover, the AD audio-guide is created with more specific criteria.

Slide 23

Now, which artefacts to describe is a fundamental first step in deciding how to organise a museum AD. It is neither practical nor desirable to describe all the exhibits, so decisions have to be made as to which are the most important

or relevant.

Slide 24

Similarly, the details of the artefact itself need to be analysed in order to create the most effective description. It is useful to remember that sighted patrons often spend little time on many exhibits, so the AD for the blind, if we wish to provide a similar experience, does not need to be overly complex.

Slide 25

It is now time to move into practical mode and start thinking about how to produce an audio description for a museum exhibit. The need to convey explicit/implicit, objective/subjective messages through non-visual forms requires extensive pre-planning.

This is the final slide in Unit Two.

Creation of these training materials was supported by ADLAB PRO (Audio Description: A Laboratory for the Development of a New Professional Profile), financed by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Programme, Key Action 2 – Strategic Partnerships, Project number: 2016-1-IT02-KA203-024311.

The information and views set out in these training materials are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Union.

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