



Pathways into Dance:

Creative Audio Describer (CAD) for Contemporary
Dance Class

Raquel Mesequer Zafe & Holly Thomas

Image Descriptions

Page 1: A wide shot of a group of nine dancers and theatre makers gathered around Holly. They are in a black box theatre space: floor, walls and ceiling are all black. Holly is sitting in front of a roll of paper, several metres long, weighted down at each end. On the paper Holly has broken down the stages of a contemporary dance class. The group are listening to Holly and looking at the paper, deep in thought. Some kneel or sit, some stand. They wear loose, comfortable clothing in bright reds, pinks, greens and black.

Page 5: In the foreground three people sit facing Holly, their backs towards the photographer. In front on them is the roll of paper, and on the other side of the paper Holly sits, speaking and gesturing passionately. Beyond Holly are the red theatre seats. It is a bright pop of colour in the black box theatre space.

Page 13: Four dancers stand in the space, facing Holly who is teaching a phrase. The dancers have their hands on their rib cage, eyes closed, concentrating and initiating movement from the rib cage. In the background, on the left of the image are blue and green yoga mats, which create a resting space. One of the group sits in the resting space and watches the others engaged in the task.

“So much of trying to access dance technique as a visually impaired person is about surviving spaces. Can we create a space where there is rigour, but where those of us who are disabled aren’t just trying to survive the situation?” Holly Thomas

Context

In 2021 Holly Thomas and I had a chat about the dance classes Holly could access and those she could not.

Holly is a visually impaired dancer and choreographer. Contact improvisation was her way into dance, and she is able to access many improvisation based techniques and classes. But as an evolving dance artist she also wants to be able to access classes that teach prescribed forms and techniques, like Flying Low or Cunningham technique.

We are both interested in creative audio description for performance, and we wondered if we could use the same principles to create a role, separate to that of the dance teacher, that would enable Holly to access classes that involve learning routines and technical forms.

With the generous support of Bristol Dance Futures, GATHER UP and Arnolfini we were able to invite and pay 8 dance practitioners to a one day lab to explore access to contemporary technique class for dancers with a visual impairment.

The day was an experimental space. Trusting in the hive mind we put the question of our imagined Creative Audio Describer role into the space, and asked for input from the dancers to play, try things out and help us shape the role together.

How to use this Resource

Holly identified 5 stages to arriving and taking part in class. This resource looks at each in turn with some prompts to help you consider VI access in your teaching practice.

This role is still evolving and is being piloted by GATHER UP, an artist led project offering a programme of training and development activity for dancers with contemporary dance practices, based in Bristol, UK.

You can currently request free CAD support to attend any class or workshop in their programmes. The practitioners who attended this initial CAD development and training lab, deliver this role.

What is the role of a Creative Audio Describer in a dance class or workshop?

A Creative Audio Describer (CAD) is someone who works one - on - one with a visually impaired dancer to audibly communicate visual information that is being shared by the leader of the session, to enable the dancer to better access a phrase or technique. This role is separate and additional to the class or workshop teacher. The CAD role may involve:

- On arrival touring and describing the studio, to support the dancer to orient in space.
- Verbally describing movement and 'form' that is being shared non-verbally.
- Witnessing the dancer and offering feedback on shape, alignment, initiation, quality of movement, etc.
- Working with the dancer in a part of the studio, or in another space outside of the studio during the session to minimise visual information when needed, to better focus on the material.
- Dancing travelling phrases across the space with the VI dancer to support navigation.
- Being a 'buddy'. The term is used in scuba diving to pair people when navigating different and difficult places underwater. We use the term because for the VI dancer, the dance studio and class can be an intimidating space.

Things to be alive with

1. We challenge the idea of 'one size fits all' in relation to accessibility. Holly and I feel it is more nuanced and a case of making tailored offers. We invite you to think about a. where and when these principles could apply to your practice b. Could you create a class that decentralises the visual in the teaching and learning of material. We did some exercises with eyes closed, not to 'simulate blindness' but to notice how we learn when we 'decentralise the visual' (n.b. this is a term Holly has coined in her practice that I use here with her permission).
2. The question of thresholds came up again and again. For example the threshold of stepping into a class or the moment when material shifts in complexity. What are the thresholds in your facilitation or dancing practice?
3. What does it mean to host, hold or lead a dance class or workshop? What kind of an enabling space do you want to create?
4. What does it mean to invite in collective care?
5. Can we be clear about the different responsibilities of the CAD and the



Pre Arrival

Prompts:

How do you set the tone for your class or workshops? And how do you communicate this to participants pre-arrival?

What information could you include in your class description to ensure Disabled dancers are welcome? Your invitation could include sentences like: 'you are welcome to take up space' or 'you are welcome to learn at your own pace' or 'you are welcome to adapt the material to how your body is today'. As well as more practical access information about arrival to the venue and to the studio.

If working with an organisation, is their access information up to date in their online communications?

Arrival & Informal Warm Up

Make yourself comfortable, close your eyes and listen to Holly's description of arriving at a dance class.

<https://on.soundcloud.com/ZJ5Vi>

Things we clocked:

The visually impaired dancer has to make a choice between using the time before class begins to warm up, or to use the time for navigation and practicalities. For example, one of Holly's techniques is to do a ritual walk around the perimeter of the studio space, to orient herself and shift other participants belongings to the edges so they are not trip hazards.

The moment of arrival and greeting can be a moment of inequity. The VI dancer is doing additional labour to locate the studio, find the teacher, figure out where and how to pay, orient in the studio and learn who else is in the room. There is a distance and threshold to cross to connect with others in this moment.

Is there space for a disabled dancer to share their access requirements with the group? If only the teacher knows, this doesn't necessarily create a safe space for a disabled dancer. For example travelling sequences could be safer if everyone knew that a dancer in the space doesn't see well. The invitation could be 'does anyone have any access needs they would like to share with the group?'

Suggestions:

- The CAD can meet visually impaired dancers in the foyer and assist with navigating through the building to the studio. Sighted guiding training may be useful for anyone in the CAD role.
- The CAD can share who is in the room, introduce the dancer to the teacher and support payment of the session (if not done online).
- The CAD can provide moments of description of the space, the atmosphere, etc. Avoid using language like 'over there', instead use language in relation to the dancers body or facing. This will help with orienting them in the studio.
- Consider an opening circle or a moment for all participants to share their names.
- Consider when a disabled dancer can share their access needs with the group, if they wish to. Make sure they have agency to decide what they share.
- Wear contrasting colours or distinctive clothing, including socks! Black socks on a black floor blend in, which is not helpful.
- Work without mirrors (which double the amount of visual information in the studio) and consider other ways to minimise visual stimuli in the studio.

Prompts:

How might you curate an arrival into the space that feels inclusive?

How do you create a community for the duration of a class?

A quandary to rumble with:

What does silence enable? The arrival and informal warm up before a session begins tends to be a quieter space, which is part of shifting the attention to the internal and tuning into our bodies.

There is something special about that collective quiet and attending to.

How can we balance this with also offering the option to share names and access needs?

Phase One:

Teacher led exercise (early in class)

Structured & unstructured patterns

On the spot

We asked two dance teachers to teach an exercise for a group of dancers who all had their eyes closed. As mentioned, this was not to 'simulate blindness' but to give people the experience of learning through listening, without visual stimuli. And to give the teacher an experience of teaching using audible verbal instructions only.

Closing the eyes is a strategy already used in somatic practice. It tends to involve slowing down, an internal focus, not learning from the body shape of others but focussing on a felt sense of the pathway, pattern or technique. How can we draw on somatic principles to make class more accessible to blind and visually impaired dancers?

Reflections of the teacher on this task:

People work at different pace and rhythms,

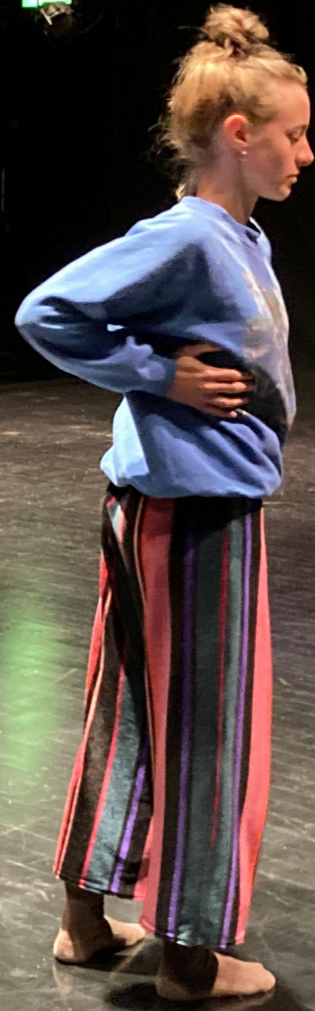
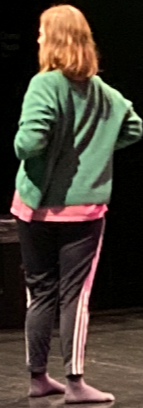
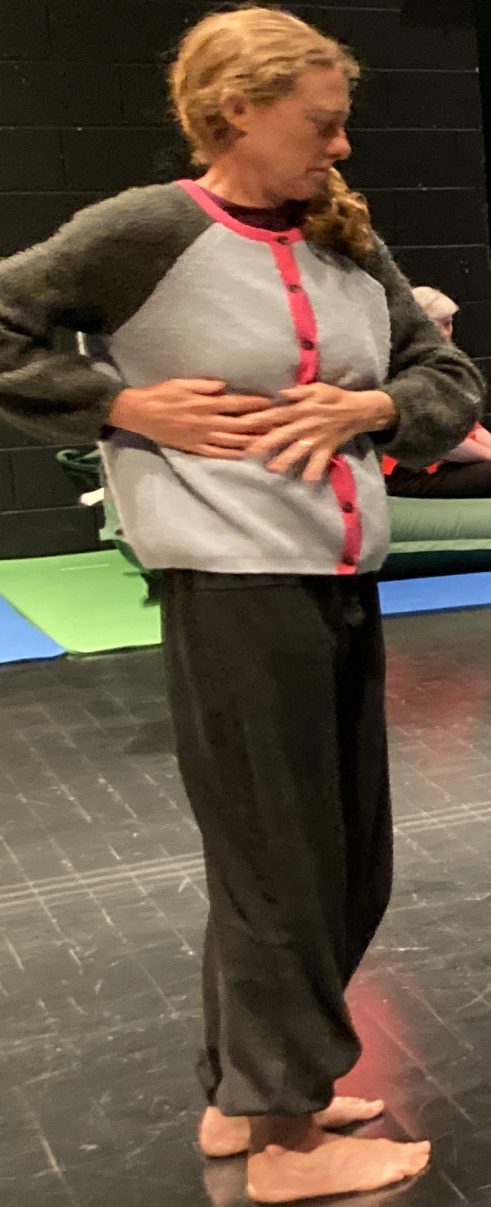
Different descriptions (visceral, quality, anatomical) work for different people,

Getting it 'wrong' was mostly useful as you can see the learning happening step by step,

How succinct and precise could you get with vocal directions?

How much vocal direction is useful to have in the studio space?

What does working with eyes closed bring to the whole group?



Information the CAD and teacher could include in their communication:

- Practical directions like “to your right” or “to your left, “towards you” or “towards me”, etc.
- Orientation or facing at ‘anchor’ moments.
- Where is the movement initiating from.
- Quality, dynamic, speed.
- Where is weight shifting in the body?
- ‘Hands on’ guidance can be a useful tool where consent is given.
- The teacher can give a lot of information through the tone and rhythm of the voice i.e. timing or using different qualities of vocal sounds.
- Visceral metaphors and images stayed with people i.e. magnetism.

Learners reflected:

Working with eyes closed created a sense that we were ‘all in it together’. There were moments of ‘guessing’ the movement, which felt ok but might not have felt ok if you were the only person ‘guessing’.

What is unison and how does it help us to learn?

“There is a lot the teacher can convey with language and with the tone of the voice. It’s like the teacher learning a new song - shifting the song that you write for class” Laila Diallo

Phase Two:

Teacher led exercise

Simple sequences and phrases

Beginning to move in space

Learners did the sequence with eyes closed and found similar things useful when beginning to move in space:

1. Right & left.
2. Direction.
3. What is the shape?
4. Initiation of movement.
5. Where things end and begin.
6. Orientation of the body and body parts.
7. Build learning in layers.
8. Sense of the principle of the phrase or technique i.e. falling.
9. Where is your centre? (can help to find flow).
10. Use of touch on own body can be helpful to trace pathways.
11. Relationship between different parts of the body i.e. scapula to little finger.
12. What else is going on in the room.

“Learning happens in layers. It’s like learning the piano - you break down the layers and then put them together again. ”

We talked about how flow can disappear when you break movement down, and how to access the flow and rhythm when running the phrase i.e. through ‘singing’ the rhythm, naming the shifts of weight, falls and catches, etc.

Phase Three: Teacher led

More complex sequences and phrases

Moving in space more, at speed, travelling

Questions:

1. Where should the CAD be? This will be different depending on the visual impairment of the dancer, and should be negotiated between the VI dancer and the CAD for each stage of class. But potentially next to the dancer for on the spot phrases, and in front of the dancer during travelling phrases.
2. What is the process of breaking down a phrase to identify clear anchors? Are there essential details or anchors to a phrase?
3. If required, could there be another room available during the session where the VI dancer and CAD could go to break down material and then rejoin the class?
4. Could the CAD be sent films of the dance sequence in advance to familiarise ahead of supporting the VI dancer?

Observations

1. A VI dancer and CAD working together, do so at a different pace to the wider class.
2. Orientation and facings can be difficult to articulate. When not articulated VI dancers tend to face towards light sources.
3. Shorthand and direct instructions are helpful (this will depend on how well the dancer and the CAD know one another).
4. It's fine to let the description of some detail go and to feed this in later as the phrase will be repeated by the teacher several times.
5. Information on body part initiation and orientation seem to provide good anchors.
6. Singing instructions was useful for quality, dynamic, and rhythm once the dancer has the shape of the phrase "that's when it felt like dancing."

End of day reflections:

1. Are we bringing the visually impaired dancer to the technique? Or the technique to meet the VI dancer?
2. To use proprioception and other senses to create class material and teach from that place, is an interesting provocation / challenge for a teacher.
3. If unison helps us learn, how can we create unison without sighted / visual cues?
4. Somatics and an internal felt sense can be used to find the flow in a set phrase.
5. All the teachers were excited about putting the CAD role into practice, with the caveat that it's something to evolve and learn and play with collectively.

“How do we continue to attend to these questions? The day did something special by inviting people into these questions. It planted a seed that people can take into their own practice” Laila Diallo

GATHER UP team reflections:

Laila: There was a moment when all the CAD's were working with the dancers. This messy, conversational way of learning was joyous.

Laura: It made me think about what it means to change the culture of the dance studio, both practically and energetically. Are we working from a place of joy? Are we working from a place of tolerance? If we are, then the failures aren't felt so keenly. And it can be an open space to experiment. Can we connect to the joy in failing? What is 'right' anyway?

Thank yous

Our thanks to Laïla Diallo, Katherine Hall, Laura Dannequin, Ania Varez, Jo Bannon, Lisa May Thomas, Linzy Na Nakorn and Anna Kazuba.

We want to thank each practitioner for their input and want to highlight the crucial importance of sharing the responsibility to co-discover ways to improve and provide access support in a live working space.

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About the authors

Holly Thomas is a UK based choreographer and performer with a specialism in inclusive choreography and embodied audio description for dance. In her practice she explores the aesthetics of choreography from a non-visual perspective. <https://hollythomasdance.co.uk/projects/half-light/>

Raquel Meseguer Zafe founded Unchartered Collective to create theatrical encounters that explore the lived experience of an invisible disability like chronic pain. Her work straddles theatre, dance, installation, performative conversations and photo-documentary www.uncharteredcollective.com



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References / further reading:

1. Read Katherine Hall's reflection on the CAD training workshop here: <https://www.gatherup.live/news/2023/11/10/reflections-on-cad-workshop-training>
2. GATHER UP access: <https://www.gatherup.live/morning-class>
3. For a deep dive introduction to Audio Description: <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/creating-audio-description-for-equality-diversity-and-inclusion>
4. Sight Loss Council <https://www.sightlosscouncils.org.uk/>
5. RNIB <https://www.rnib.org.uk/>
6. Extant Theatre make theatre for blind and partially sighted people. They also do a lot of advocacy work <https://extant.org.uk/>

Best Practice for communicating with people who are blind or partially sighted:

Font size minimum 16

Simple font like Arial

Minimum 1.5 line spacing

Bold is ok for headings but do not overuse

No italics

Provide an audio version of any longer documents and consider a phone call or voice note rather than emails.