

Paul Huxham

0439 987 424  
ph@heardofaudio.com

11 May 2015

An open letter to educational institutions instructing students in Audio skills.

To whom it may concern,

I will first explain my background then I shall state the problem I am seeing and then propose a solution to this problem.

After completing and passing my TEE at the end of 1986 I started in sound at Channel Seven Perth as a trainee on the basis that if after 6 months I showed promise I might be offered a full time position. That position was offered and from then I learned all of the fundamental aspects of sound. All of the training was on the job and although not formally tested I had to pass all of the *tests* the higher level staff set me to progress. We did boom swinging, location sound, planning, rigging, studio operation, outside broadcasts, post production sound, pretty much every aspect of sound for television.

In 2003 the Seven Network in Perth made almost everyone redundant in sound and I chose to leave as head of the audio department and become a freelancer.

Since starting at the bottom of the sound ladder in 1986 (getting coffee, cleaning up and making cables) I have progressed through many areas and aspects of sound to find a niche that particularly suits me. For me this is audio director (AD) and audio assistant (AA).

Currently I find myself in demand as an AA and as the only available freelance AD who can be readily booked (there are others but full time at 3 of the networks). Most of the AA/AD work is for sport: AFL, Super 15, A-League, WAFL, Netball, Basketball, Cricket and other one off sport events. There are also other outside broadcasts that happen throughout the year.

There is a shortage in Perth of AA's and AD's, so reasonably often at outside broadcasts we are sent (now ex) students to assess for the hiring companies primarily to be employed as AA's. This year in particular as more sports are being broadcast than ever before the OB companies are struggling to crew the AA positions. I have to yet to see anyone come along who would be appropriate to recommend to train as an AD.

**The problem as I see it is a combination of two things:**

1. The (now ex) students who arrive on the day for checking suitability are not competent in a number of areas. They all come in and say I've got a diploma in sound post studio broadcast engineering or something or other but they have *no idea about the basics*. I am not referring to explicit knowledge of a certain brand or model of gear or what equalisation and compression is but rather:
  - Lack of general enthusiasm, common sense, interest in sound and willingness to jump in and help.

- Not interested in doing the hard part of the job like carrying boxes and rolling up cables.
  - How they present themselves both physically and in general attitude to other crew and presenters.
  - Lack of demonstrable on the job knowledge about audio basics such as (but not limited to):
    - i. Following a basic multicore input/output diagram.
    - ii. Putting on a presenter earpiece (and cleaning it beforehand)
    - iii. Inputs and outputs and how they relate to outboard gear
    - iv. Radio mic basics like antenna placement, frequency and level adjustment on transmitters
    - v. Purpose and placement of different types of microphones
    - vi. Scared or embarrassed to talk into a microphone for line checks
    - vii. Labelling things
    - viii. No ability to problem solve.
  - No one wants to start at the bottom of the ladder and work upwards, they want in at the top.
2. The courses offered are obviously very wide in scope as there are a great number of areas that encompass today's broadcasting. The issue here is that the students know very little about any area with any detail. For example there is no point in skipping over location sound if you are teaching people to record pieces to camera out in the field — just giving them the gear and no explanation does not help them; in fact it makes everything worse as then they perceive that no skills are required to do location sound which is completely the opposite. You don't just point the mic at the subject matter, swinging a boom and hiding a mic under clothes are learned skills, audio levels and bottom end roll off are not only important but critical. So in the case of such broad subject matter, a certificate of understanding would be more appropriate.

I would like to see **students who qualify be able to walk in and at the very least be personable and perform basic audio tasks.** It is no good giving these students qualifications if they can't do the basics and this equally applies to other elements of a broadcasting course.

The problem with qualifications is people who have them think they know it all and it is their right to be first in line for a job when in reality they may be the most qualified and most unsuitable at the same time. I understand that a qualification is not a be all and end all, but that is how the students see it. A course with such a broad scope as broadcasting is leading the students to believe that they know everything there is to know. I also appreciate that it's just not possible for every student to be brilliant at sound initially or to have tons of experience — that is just not going to happen.

**It would be better** if five things happened:

1. It is made clear that every individual role in broadcasting (including AA) is a serious role that does require skill and commitment to that role if you are to be employable.
2. Qualifications were only handed out to people who can do the job they're supposed to have qualified for. Not everyone should expect to pass. Some people will never be adept at sound like I don't try to fix my car when it doesn't start.
3. Different things were taught to the students that are more appropriate to their job roles. Being personable and possessing good interpersonal skills is equally important as good audio skills.
4. Students need to be evaluated in the field. I would suggest working together with OB companies to have students placed individually on jobs for an assessment as to their suitability for particular roles and observation of their skill set. I for one am happy for this to happen at jobs I am at.
5. No one should expect to step into the job list at the top but start lower down working up and learning more working towards the higher roles. To become an AD you must be a competent AA first.

It is not easy to teach people common sense or enthusiasm, but an effort must be made and students must realise that without the non audio/video skills they will struggle to find employment in this vocation.

For people wishing to pursue a career in sound maybe a more sound oriented course would be more appropriate.

I think it is also pertinent to mention that the AD role is a very major step up from an AA role. On an outside broadcast the responsibility of all sound related things rests with the AD. If an AA can't do something or the audio router is not getting the right sources or the configuration of the world mix feed is incorrect or the camera has a setting in the menu that needs changing, the AD has to sort it out. The console configuration and layout is at the discretion of the AD so a solid understanding of equalisation, compression, grouping, routing and interfacing with communications, EVS, VT and transmission links is required hand in hand with familiarity with the audio console, fibre, MADI and other protocols, computer interfaces and outboard gear as well as other facilities such as talkback and routers in the truck or studio. Setups and configurations are very necessarily complex. In addition, strong and disciplined personal skills are required to work under pressure from Directors and Producers in a live situation where mistakes are extremely undesirable.

Without suitable long term training it is extremely difficult to fill the AD role. *Moving the faders up and down* during a show is only one of the functions of an AD and is the easiest. The AD spends the least amount of time on a job doing this particular task. I've noticed that a lot of students just want to do that — move faders up and down. Unfortunately it's just not like that. If you can't set it up by yourself and fault find it you should not be sitting in the AD chair. I think this needs to be made clear to students so their expectations are not set too high. The basics are important first. Some roles you do not walk into but grow into, and being an AD is one of them. I have spent thirty years to get where I am and I still learn things every day and on every job.

I hope that you are not disappointed, discouraged or think my comments folly as I make these suggestions sincerely, in the interest of current and future students. I am more than happy to be involved in setting a curriculum that is relevant for the students and enable them to be ready for employment when they leave a course.

Please feel free to contact me if you wish as I am more than happy to make myself available to discuss these matters further. I am not seeking employment so do not wish to be paid; my interest is seeing these student be employable.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul Huxham". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'P'.

Paul Huxham