

Volume 64, Number 2, Winter 2014

WORD MATTERS

The Journal of The Society of Teachers of Speech and Drama
1914-2014

Connecting teachers of communication, performance and life skills



ACCENTS

WORD MATTERS interview with Catherine Weate

The Accent App was featured in the reviews section of the Journal in the Spring. Here the developer, Catherine Weate, explains how it came about.



Tell us a little bit about your work as a voice/dialect coach.

I'm a freelance coach who works with any area of vocal need or accent/dialect, continually exploring ways in which we communicate as human beings. However, my area of speciality is working with actors as part of a creative process (I'm particularly interested in how a character's voice can be brought to life for an

audience). My clients are often high-profile celebrities and there have been some very special actors whom I'm proud to have worked with on specific projects.

What is *The Real Accent App*?

The Real Accent App: USA and *The Real Accent App: England* are the first in a series of ground breaking *Voice Coach in your Pocket*® apps that link recordings of real people with a 10-step accent learning programme. In other words, native speaker samples are used as a teaching tool, taking the user through a step-by-step process in much the same way that a voice/dialect specialist would do when coaching an actor.

Where did you get the idea for developing an app?

The original idea came from an app developer friend, Gavin Howard, who convinced me of the need. There's very little source material available for actors and even less that explains how to go about working on specific accents. Previously, the only options were to conduct your own 'hit-and-miss' research from the internet or employ the services of a coach. Often, actors without work can't afford the latter option and actors in work don't have the time. We also wanted to help amateur actors, who might be untrained and need some help. So Gavin and I formed a company, Howard Weate Productions, and created the apps together.

Our primary target demographic is the acting community. We developed the apps to be user-friendly for professional trained actors, professional untrained actors, amateur actors and student actors. However, producers, directors, coaches and teachers also find the apps incredibly useful. Meeting the needs of all was a challenge so the apps were rigorously tested across the community before release. We were blown away

by the excitement of our testers and ploughed their feedback into the final design.

Did you employ technical people?

The best part about Howard Weate Productions is that all our work is done 'in-house'. The combination of my voice/dialect knowledge and Gavin's app/software knowledge means that we don't have to outsource the work. We collect the material together then I turn my intellectual property about particular accents into training programmes and Gavin codes the apps. Essentially, however, we both work on the overall design. It's an incredibly creative process and, most importantly, we're in control every step of the way.

What new skills did you have to learn?

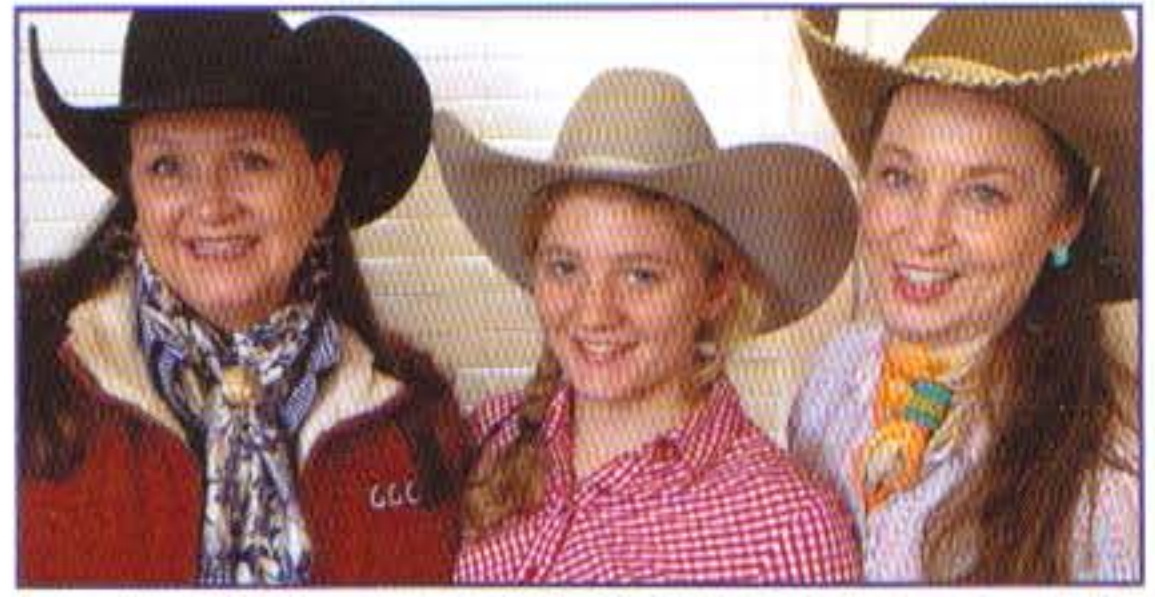
I've always prided myself on being technology-savvy however there's been a fairly steep learning curve as well. I've absorbed an enormous amount about the app world and continue to do so. Plus, Gavin has learnt all about accent/dialect coaching. His original background was in technical theatre so he wasn't coming to the business uninformed; although I did give him a coaching session before we even started the first app just so he knew what I was on about.

Why US accents first?

We thought long and hard about where we wanted to start and the US kept coming up trumps. The majority of my coaching work is in American accents for Brits. This is partially because of high-profile British actors carving out careers in Hollywood, the rise of American material in British theatres (amateur as well as professional) and the sheer volume of British actors now flying over to try their luck during pilot season in LA each year. We also looked at the global market and there are similar needs in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada as well as the US (where actors need to build up their knowledge of regional American dialects). Armed with this knowledge, we ended up taking three trips to the US in 2013 to get what we wanted. It was an expensive start but well worth it as the quality of our recordings is extraordinary. For our second app, we concentrated on home soil: England. A less expensive option but we still managed to rack up the travel miles to find our native speakers.

How did you undertake your research?

Extensive research and preparation went into each trip in order to find the 'right' recording subjects. Even so, it wasn't easy, given our strict criteria. Ideally, we look for people born, raised and still living in their original communities. Accents



adjust when people move away from their birth environments and although 'hybrid' accents can be useful they're not a great starting point for working on character. Also, we try not to use actors who are too 'aware' of their own accent. Ultimately we need two to four people from each place with at least one male and one female subject (because occasionally there are gender differences).

We start by asking people we know who have links in our target town or city, which usually leads us to another set of people, who then introduce us to potential subjects. For example, a contact we knew in Boston emailed friends and colleagues in the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Blue Man Group. Eventually, their involvement led us to Kent, a theatre security guard with a pitch perfect South Boston accent.

Once potential subjects get in touch via email or our website then we call them to informally 'test' their accent. Even at that stage they might not be quite what we're looking for and we have to start all over again.

Sometimes, despite extensive research, we aren't able to find anyone. Oklahoma City was hair-raising because after weeks of work, nobody with a strong enough accent had turned up and there was only 24 hours between our arrival and departure flights to seek out appropriate people. Luckily, we found a young cowboy (Jesse) and cowgirl (Jessica) working at Stockyard City.

Our trips have also helped us understand more about the cultures we're representing on the app. For that reason alone the experiences have been invaluable: we've conducted research at the Texas State Fair in Dallas, a 'cattle roping' party north of Oklahoma City and behind the scenes of the Tennessee State Capital in Nashville. We've recorded in homes, restaurants, cars, taxis, hotels, offices and conference rooms: we've even recorded in the presence of a sleepy python and a couple of live hand guns. None of it easy if you could see the amount of recording equipment we carry around.

Once the USA app released, excitement grew and we were contacted by an extraordinary number of people who wanted to record for the England app after our appearances on BBC Radio London, BBC Liverpool, BBC Manchester and Radio 4 Midweek. However, there were still pubs to trawl and parking attendants, police, tour guides and waiters to approach when we were on the move through English towns and cities. Everybody responded with interest and everybody had something to say about their home accent.

Describe some of the features on your app.

Our unique step-by-step programme is an important feature on our apps as it breaks the process of learning an accent into manageable bits. Each 'step' is attached to native speaker recordings: sometimes a word, sometimes a sentence, sometimes a chunk of conversational speech. Plus there's a 'help' section to guide you through and a 'definitions' section that de-mystifies some of the technical terms associated with learning an accent.

Another important feature is the interactive recording/ comparison function. Throughout the app you can listen to a native speaker sentence, record yourself speaking the same sentence and then compare your progress by listening back to both samples side by side. This speeds up learning because once the comparison is in your ear, it's so much easier to transfer to your mouth.

There's also a 'Test Your Ear' quiz that provides an extra boost to your listening skills. Learning an accent is all about co-ordinating the brain, the ear and the mouth. The more you listen, the more you absorb.

How has it been received by actors?

We've been overwhelmed with positive responses from both professional and amateur actors. That's because there's nothing else like it out there and, for those who've downloaded already, it's become an invaluable part of their rehearsal process. There's also been incredible interest from the press, particularly about our accent-finding tours and the riveting personal stories that our recording subjects have contributed.

What do you plan to do next?

The ultimate goal is to keep travelling, keep recording and keep releasing new apps with more accents. Next on the list is *The Real Accent App: Celtic Nations* and *The Real Accent App: Europe*. Then, of course, there's the rest of the world. Not only that but we're keen to release other types of *Voice Coach in your Pocket*® apps to help everybody, not just actors, make the most of their voice.

The Real Accent App: USA and *The Real Accent App: England* are available in the App Store and on Google Play. For more information visit www.realaccentapp.com or follow us on twitter @realaccentapp