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Themed Attractions: Visitors are Immersed, Educated and Engaged at Air Force One Discovery Center



By Mira Cohen

In this educator’s opinion, a lot of so-called educational attractions are nothing more than infused movies, video games, and other media originally designed for entertainment purposes with selected educational content.

The “spoonful of sugar” approach to revolutionizing education with immersive technological presentations is based on the faulty premise that education is tedious, and that in order to make the process of education bearable, educational content must mirror entertainment models. My problem with this approach is that contemporary entertainment models tend to be limited by their passive or isolationist nature – a structure that

generally doesn't serve educational goals.

At the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, we sought to adapt the tools of entertainment in the pursuit to engage a technologically sophisticated generation and enhance authentic learning. Supported by a grant from the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, we created an interactive historical theater – the Air Force One Discovery Center – where students assume realistic decision making roles in a technologically integrated, 5,000 square foot, mixed-media environment. The experience stimulates students to think critically about serious complicated issues, report on their findings, and discuss their ideas in a social setting that utilizes a high level of discourse.

The environments in which the students interact – an Oval Office replica, a naval aircraft carrier, a White House press room and Air Force One motion simulator represent iconic emblems of the American presidency – political power, military strength, the power of the pen, and Air Force One representing face-to-face diplomacy as the traveling White House. Students are immersed in the seats of power and guided through a series of carefully scripted historically based scenarios and called upon by their peers to respond to the crisis.

The experience integrates role-playing techniques commonly used in video games. But, this is not a game or a gimmick. This is not an isolated experience where “players” sit by themselves and interact with fictional characters. We insist upon face-to-face interaction and serious examination of complex historical facts and dilemmas through content and through skills-based curricula.

The experience is peppered with the kind of surprise plot twists found in most movies, but this time students are experiencing rather than passively watching the events. As a result, teachers who bring their students here for this experience remark that they are “transfixed,” or “fully engaged.”

Concept, design and production of Air Force One Discovery Center were guided by educational professionals and educational goals. It is a valuable educational adventure that provides depth and meaning for all visitors to the Reagan Library. Many of our adult visitors remark that the center is “the coolest thing they’ve ever seen.” It’s fun, and engages the visitors emotionally by its multi-sensory three dimensional special effects. But, it is greater than the sum of all of these parts.

When the educational element drives the process, meaningful and engaging products can be created. When working with collaborative teams of creative professionals, educators have a unique set of skills to help produce fully immersive, pedagogically sound experiences for use both in the classroom and as supplemental tools. A new generation demands unique models for engaging sophisticated audiences in deeply thoughtful and complex issues. The possibilities are limitless and the pay-off is great.

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