

Journey with Veterans

Virtual Reality Program using Google Expeditions

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“Where would you like to go?” is the question of the day. We have stood atop the Great Wall of China, swam with sea lions in the Galapagos Islands, and walked along the vast red sands of Mars. Each journey was unique and available through the library.

As a community librarian in charge of outreach to seniors and veterans, I first learned about the virtual tour idea from a colleague who returned from a conference excited to tell me about a workshop she had attended. The workshop she had taken described a program which utilized Google Expeditions to take seniors on virtual tours. This idea stayed with me for months until Fresno County Public Library obtained the \$3000 Value of Libraries grant, which was funded by the California Library Services Act. As a part of this grant, \$2905 went to purchase a Google Expeditions kit and supplied to create a virtual reality program called Journey with Veterans. The kit includes 5 viewers and 1 tablet. A viewer is basically a Google Cardboard except the case is plastic and there is a smartphone inside of the case. During the program, I use the table to select and run each tour. The tour I select on the tablet is projected to the 5 viewers so participants can experience it. In this manner, veterans can explore places without physically having to travel anywhere.

The Journey with Veterans program took the technology to the veterans instead of requiring them to come into the library. The two locations that were chosen were the Veterans Home of California - Fresno and the Community Living Center at the VA Medical Center in Fresno, CA. From the time the program began in September 2019 to March 2020, when the pandemic shutdown brought a halt to the program, the library hosted 26 sessions at these two locations with 182 veterans. In sessions where more than 5 people were in attendance, the viewers were shared between the participants.

The tablet and smartphones inside of the viewers have an app installed on them called Google Expeditions which is the software that runs the tours. One hotspot, which was already owned by the library, was used for this program. It is a requirement that all the viewers and the tablet are connected to the same WiFi. Having a portable WiFi connection was necessary to run this program in locations where there was not access to a strong internet connection.

Each tour is a selection of still 360-degree views. The landscape does not move. Instead, the participant turns their head around, up and down to look at the entire scene. The control tablet included additional menu items not seen by participants. These items included scripts that I can read off about the landscape we are looking at and suggested points of interest that I could highlight for participants. When I selected the point of interest on the tablet, the participant would see arrows pointing to that area of their screen. The participant would follow the arrows by turning their head in the direction that was indicated. The participants knew they were looking at the area of interest when the arrows disappeared and was replaced by a white circle surrounding the relevant portion of the screen.

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The viewers did not have straps attached to them and there was no way to attach straps to them. Therefore, the viewer could not be strapped to the participant's head. Instead, the participant had to hold up the viewer the entire time they wished to look through it. This presented a challenge for participants who did not have the ability to hold the viewer on their own. At the locations I went to, there were staff available to help and they would hold the viewer up to a participant's eyes. In some cases, one staff person held the viewer up for the participant while another would turn the participant's wheelchair in a circle so they could see the entire image.

Each program lasted 30-45 minutes but the amount of time looking through the viewer was kept to around 15-20 minutes. The rest of the time was filled with talking about the location that we are viewing. For the veterans in memory care at the Veterans Home of California - Fresno, this program was designed with the hope that it would allow the veterans to reminisce about places they had visited and lived in and encouraged them to talk about their experiences. Some of the participants had been to the countries that we visited virtually and they reminisced on their time there. At every session, the participants shared their enthusiasm and eagerness to continue the program.

The program once was tried with music. On one of my first visits to the Community Living Center at the VA Medical Center, a participant asked if he could play music in the background. Since I had thought about incorporating music into the program, I agreed, and the participant played some classical music from his own device. Though it was a good idea, the execution did not work well. The music was coming from one location, which made it too loud when one stood near it but too quiet once one walked too far away. I found the music difficult to talk over while giving the tour. I believe that incorporating sounds of the location we visit, such as the sounds of the countryside or a big city would make the experience more immersive. However, I have yet to find a way to do so successfully.

After the grant ended, I continued the program at both locations. The partnership I had created at the Veterans Home of California-Fresno grew into a second program, Storytime with Veterans which was requested by specifically by the residents. I alternated my visits so that some weeks we did a virtual reality program and some weeks I read to them. One time, there was miscommunication and the activity coordinator thought I had come to read a story but I was under the impression that it was a virtual reality week and so I had brought the Google Expeditions with me. The solution was to do both. One of the Google Expeditions tours is a very short and much abridged virtual reality version of Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea by Jules Verne. The tour used artwork to represent scenes from the books and each scene tells a different part of the story. The Veterans Home's residents were treated to both a story and a virtual reality tour at the same time.

Up until the library's shutdown in mid-March due to COVID-19, I was in the process of expanding the use of the Google Expeditions but was unable to continue. Since then, the equipment has not been used. Restarting the program now includes multiple challenges, not the least of which is sanitizing the devices. Sanitation was a consideration even before COVID-19 and sanitary virtual reality masks were acquired using grant funds as part of the initial program. These masks look like strips of cloth that line the eyes with strings to hook it around the ears to hold it in place. Cleaning products were also purchased and utilized to clean the devices after each program.

Before COVID-19, a viewer could be handled by multiple people before it was cleaned. I always handled them first to prepare them for use. Then I handed each one to the participant. Occasionally they were also handled by staff. I always cleaned the viewers right after the program ended but not during the program. With the current COVID-19 restrictions, the sanitation practices previously used are inadequate. I do not know the future of the program in a post-COVID-19 world, but I intend to begin the program again once when it becomes safe to do so and I will incorporate all required precautions and restrictions. I look forward to once more being able to take veterans on exciting virtual journeys.