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**Experiential Learning in Virtual and Fictional Worlds: Integrating Diverse Assignments and Assessments to Teach Tough Topics in Social Psychology**

I teach tough topics in social psychology: the social psychological underpinnings of race and racism. Teaching about these and other difficult issues is a challenging yet necessary endeavor in the 21st century—one that requires instructors to think flexibility and creatively. In my courses, the issues surrounding the social psychological underpinnings of race and racism—history, laws, and policy, to name a few—and the research findings themselves, often confront students with facts and ideas that challenge traditional Western understandings of meritocracy, fairness, and justice. To address these challenges, I have integrated a series of experiential learning activities into my courses that take students to “fictional” worlds through virtual reality and comics. For example, I use a series of engaging race-related virtual reality simulations that enable perspective-taking and the learning of history. In addition, using a cartoon making software, students pictorially explain a (or a set of) social psychological process(es) that has contributed to our understanding of how racism is constructed, reinforced, and/or maintained in our society. These engaging and even “fun” activities encourage students to grapple with difficult concepts and proposed solutions in a manner that breaks the heaviness of these topics. These experiences promote perspective-taking and critical thinking, increasing empathy, open and honest dialogue, and learning about often uncomfortable and emotionally-charged issues. Though these activities have been applied to courses teaching about the psychology of racism, I discuss how they can be applied broadly to diverse content areas in psychology.

**Brief Bio**

Dr. Valerie Jones Taylor is an Assistant Professor of Psychology and Africana Studies at Lehigh University. She earned a doctorate in social psychology at Stanford University and a B.A. in psychology and ethnic studies, with a concentration in African & African American Studies, at the University of Texas at Austin. Before joining Lehigh’s faculty, Taylor served as an assistant professor at Spelman College and was a postdoctoral fellow at Princeton University. Her research areas include intergroup relations, social identity threat, stereotyping and discrimination, and cultural psychology. Specifically, she investigates how stereotyping and prejudice affect underrepresented groups' academic performance, interracial interactions, and the treatment of racialized physical spaces. Her work also examines ways to improve interracial encounters in educational and social contexts using virtual reality.