

# Olivia Cole

## Arts Programming Overview + Teaching Artist(s) Bio

### Programming

During my time with the Governor's School for the Arts, I taught classes of 26-30 high school students. These classes pulled students from counties all over Kentucky. In addition, I have regularly attended writing conferences and workshops at public schools in Kentucky and Tennessee, where I taught classes from 8-30 in size, both middle and high school students and occasionally adults.

### Teaching Artist(s) Bios(s)

Olivia A. Cole is a writer from Louisville, Kentucky. Her essays have been published by Bitch Media, Real Simple, The L.A. Times, HuffPost, Teen Vogue, Gay Mag, and more. She taught creative writing at the Kentucky Governor's School for the Arts for six years, guiding her students through more than poetry and fiction but also considerations of the world and who they are in it. She is the author of six novels, most recently *The Truth About White Lies*. *Dear Medusa*, Olivia's first novel-in-verse, will be released in Spring 2023.

### Artistic Content of Programming

At the beginning of the program, I entered the classroom for the first time ready to learn from and about my students. Who they are, where they're from, who named them – anything they want to share. I find out what they want to learn in the program, where their interests and passions lie. From there I adjust the roadmap of my class, drawing on prepared exercises that I believe will best suit the group – sometimes a class will lean more toward poetry, whereas with some I feel that memoir should be the focus. In any case, the artistic content that we cover in the program will span across poetry, prose, plays, and more, but I try to focus on the core of what I learn about the students on Day One.

As far as measuring outcomes, a post-program survey is always conducted. But I try to “measure outcomes” each day in class, starting the day with a check-in so we can all get a feel for each other, and regularly inviting feedback. My students this summer took to calling it “vibe-check.” A regular vibe check allows students to feel heard, and gives me the gift of being able to switch gears if things aren't working for the group.

### Educational Content of Programming

In my classroom, educational outcomes are a byproduct of artistic ones. In discussing the political and social forces that shape fiction, for example, students are broadening their perspective and understanding of the world, as well as deepening their artistic understanding. And, of course, on a basic

level, there is the value of learning the kind of vocabulary that allows us to discuss literature more fluently: metaphor, simile, voice, diction, etc. – all the things that become more than terms to memorize when they're used in lively discussions of art that is both relatable and emotionally gripping. Measuring those kinds of outcomes is better done by observation than by demanding any sort of testing – I ask myself questions about my students: how much more comfortable are they in discussing metaphor at the end of the program than at the beginning? What do they notice about a poem that they would've missed before?

### **Process for hiring, training, and evaluating performance/effectiveness.**

Every summer when the program is finished, I read my student evaluations and sit with their contents, good and bad. I take my students' feedback seriously and write down the ones that hit hardest. I discuss with fellow faculty and learn from mentors. I read pedagogy and recent books about teaching, such as *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop*. I think a big part of being a good teacher is remaining a student forever, and rather than seeing myself as at the head of the class as a superior, looking at the room as a big crowd of mentors. They'll be running the world someday, after all. I learn from them every chance I get.

### **How are participants of all backgrounds and abilities included in programming?**

I insist on my curriculum representing the world as it is, not as it is imagined in Western canon, which is as outdated as it is exclusionary. As a writer and educator, it is my duty to be an eternal student: always learning, always reading new work, always searching for new voices. I have a responsibility for the work we read in class to be mirrors for the young people in that classroom, but also windows so they can look out at the rest of the world. (Credit to Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop for this famous analogy.)

### **How do we engage teachers and community center staff before, during, and after programming?**

At Governor's School for the Arts, my role as a faculty member was mostly limited to the classroom, with administrative roles tending to the relationships between the program and schools around the state. That said, when I wasn't satisfied with the level of diversity in the program, I did request to be involved in recruiting, a request which was granted and allowed me to attend multiple JCS high schools and Louisville programs such as the Boys and Girls Club, where I met with teachers and community leaders to spread the word about the GSA program and entice young people to apply when they were eligible. Being a partner to teachers and not merely a resource is important to me. I have never wanted to simply be a "here if you have questions" type of educator – I want to be a partner who is deeply involved in the artistic growth of young people, particularly those who are too often overlooked.

## **How do we engage participants in the creative and learning process?**

As I mentioned above in my brief description of artistic content, I believe positively gauging where my students are coming from and where they see themselves going is a huge part of creating a program that engages their passion. I'm not there to teach them what I want to learn – I'm there to teach them what they want to learn...I just show them what they need to know to get there. It's a fine balance, but it's one that incorporates music, pop culture, and a safe place for honest, judgment-free discussion. Building trust is how we keep young people from disappearing into the cave of their heads.