Jessica Sharpenstein

Arts Programming Overview + Teaching Artist(s) Bio

Jessica is an award-winning educator and teaching artist whose passion for the arts and commitment to innovative teaching have shaped her approach to mentorship and literacy. With a robust background in arts-based literacy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and mindfulness, she is dedicated to uncovering the rich stories that emerge from her students' imaginations. Her work has earned her prestigious accolades, including the Chuck Thompson Award for Master of Arts in Teaching and the Outstanding Master of Arts in Teaching award from the University of Louisville in 2021.

Jessica's commitment to the arts extends to her work with multilingual and systemically marginalized adolescents. She has developed an arts-integration pilot for emergent multilingual students, presenting her findings at the 2021 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Conference as well as being published in The English Journal in 2022. Her participation in the ¡Habla! Institute in Mexico further exemplifies her dedication to culturally responsive teaching, allowing her to connect with educators and students from diverse backgrounds.

In her teaching, Jessica creates a nurturing environment where students feel empowered to share their lived stories and uncover the richness of their imaginations. Her work is grounded in the belief that every student has a unique voice and perspective, and she is dedicated to helping them articulate their thoughts and emotions through various artistic mediums—drama, movement, sound, writing, and visual art— using these forms as vehicles for personal empowerment and social change.

In her role as a mindfulness advocate, Jessica developed a comprehensive program at a Title One school, supporting behavioral alternatives while enhancing literacy. This initiative positively impacted over 1,200 students, helping them cultivate coping mechanisms and mindfulness practices that promote emotional well-being. Her Mindful Literacy lab interventions for secondary education focused on integrating mindfulness with literacy, fostering attention management and self-efficacy.

Currently, as a recipient of a 2023 and 2024 Kentucky Foundation for Women Art Meets Activism Grant, Jessica is developing a mindful arts-based literacy experience for refugee and asylum-seeking multilingual youth. This project uses trauma-informed practices to generate trust, belonging, and visibility in their community. Through writing, music, visual arts, drama, and breathwork, participants will share their lived worlds with Literatura de Cordel (Brazilian string art), exhibitions, and performances that spur ideas, action, and change for the community. Jessica is an accomplished Teaching Artist collaborating with esteemed theatre companies such

as Actors Theatre of Louisville, StageOne Louisville, and Looking for Lilith. Her work includes serving as a teaching artist for Disney Musicals in Schools, developing bilingual curricula for multilingual students, and delivering drama experiences focusing on uncovering unheard voices within the community.

Her selected acting roles showcase her versatility, including performances in Gloria: A Life with Even Theatre Company, Cabaret with Pandora Productions, and Sordid Lives and A Very Sordid Wedding with Pandora Productions.

In addition to acting, Jessica has a strong background in music direction and direction. She served as the Music Director for Nate the Great at StageOne Louisville in 2024 and has directed The P**sy Grabber Plays and Sat Nam with Eve Theatre Company. Her expertise also extends to movement coaching and choreography, contributing to productions such as Southern Comfort. Jessica's work reflects her dedication to fostering creativity and collaboration in the performing arts.

Before entering the field of education, Jessica earned a Master of Science in Exercise Physiology, focusing on cognitive behavior change and mindfulness. Her extensive experience in the wellness industry, which includes presenting at American College of Sports Medicine conferences and designing wellness curricula, enriches her teaching approach, allowing her to integrate principles of wellness and arts into her literacy practices.

Jessica is not only an educator but also a creative soul who embodies the spirit of exploration and joy. She loves to laugh, dance, play music, and engage in movement, infusing her classrooms with energy and enthusiasm. With a lifelong commitment to the performing arts, she began her journey at the age of three, performing in musical theater while her father played in the orchestra pit. This early exposure ignited a love for creative expression that has shaped her career as a performing artist, pianist, writer, and advocate for social change through the arts. Her belief in the power of art as a means of expression and connection inspires her students to embrace their creativity and step outside their comfort zones.

An innovative educator, Jessica is committed to arts integration, literacy development, and social change. By creating inclusive, dynamic learning environments that honor diverse identities and experiences, she prepares her students to navigate their world with confidence, creativity, and resilience. Through her work, Jessica not only nurtures artistic expression but also fosters the critical skills necessary for her students to effect positive change in their lives and communities.

LinkedIn Profile with Comprehensive Professional Experience:
https://www.linkedin.com/in/jessica-sharpenstein-2983083a/

Theatre Resume:

Artistic Content of Programming

The artistic content of my programming centers on creating socially engaged art through multidisciplinary practices. By blending mindfulness, visual arts, performance, and community-building activities, participants are invited to explore and express personal and collective stories of social change.

Mindfulness practices- such as breathwork, meditation, and visualization serve as foundational tools to cultivate emotional literacy and self-regulation. These practices guide participants through introspection, empowering them to challenge oppressive ideologies and take personal action steps toward social change. These internal shifts are mirrored in the outward artistic expression throughout the program.

Literatura de Cordel- a Brazilian tradition, becomes a vessel for community-building and artistic collaboration. Participants contribute writing, poetry, and visual art to create a cordel that not only houses creative expression but also serves as a powerful medium for social commentary. Using texts from creators like Pauli Murray and Kara Walker, participants examine their own identities and experiences, while also reflecting on those of others.

Through theater-based ensemble activities, participants engage in arts-based community-building, which fosters collaboration and trust. These activities serve as both a rehearsal space for empathy and a microcosm for creating inclusive and harmonious communities. The culmination of these experiences is brought together in performance poetry, where participants write, rehearse, and perform their poetry. Gestures, tableaus, and spoken word all serve to highlight themes of social change and personal reflection, amplifying their voices in powerful ways.

Soundscapes, song writing and restorative visual art processes add depth to the artistic experience. Participants explore sound and music as expressions of community, creating soundscapes that symbolize their ideas about belonging, trust, and conflict. Similarly, layers of visual expression—through writing, drawing, painting, and collage—provide an outlet for examining and visually articulating the dynamics of community.

Measurement of Outcomes:
Qualitative metrics include participant testimonials, self-reflections, and audience reactions to final exhibitions and performances. Through self-inquiry, participants explore their growth in emotional regulation and personal expression. Audience and visitor feedback capture the impact of participants' creations, showing how art can inspire social change. Example: https://drive.google.com/file/d/17GKvle-UXzbjHWJlhEyw-LUBfhjBbtpQ/view?usp=sharing

Quantitative metrics involve tracking the number of participants, repeat engagement, and the completion of creative projects such as visual art pieces, poetry performances, and soundscapes. These

metrics offer tangible evidence of the program's reach and success.

Educational Content of Programming

The educational content of my programming integrates arts education, mindfulness, and trauma-informed practices to foster emotional literacy, self-expression, and critical thinking. Drawing on my experience teaching multilingual youth and studying the arts integration approach, I create a learning environment where students engage with multiple modalities—visual arts, drama, movement, sound, and writing—while exploring social change themes.

One of the core principles of my educational programming is the use of multiliteracies. I guide students in understanding and expressing complex ideas through various forms of communication, including visual, digital, and emotional literacy. By using texts as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, students not only reflect on their own experiences but also gain insight into the lives of others. For example, in one project, students populated a Padlet board with poems, art, articles, and videos that resonated with their experiences of immigration, oppression, and identity struggles. This digital literacy exercise helped students to critically engage with material, which then inspired them to create personal narratives and visual symbols expressing their emotions and stories.

Throughout the program, I employ trauma-informed practices and mindfulness techniques to support students in exploring difficult emotions and experiences. Mindfulness exercises such as breathwork, visualization, and self-reflection help students build emotional regulation skills, while simultaneously deepening their capacity for empathy and compassion. These practices lay the groundwork for collaborative learning, where students support one another in expressing complex emotions and ideas through art-making.

As the lead artist, I focus on arts integration—merging educational content with the creative process. Participants learn about community, trust, and social change not just through theoretical discussions but by creating art that represents these concepts. Whether it's performing poetry, composing soundscapes, or creating visual collages, students are given agency in their learning. Each lesson is differentiated to meet individual learning needs, encouraging personal empowerment and self-expression.

Measurement of Outcomes:
Qualitative metrics include student self-reflection, feedback, and the final exhibition. By analyzing their own growth in emotional literacy and artistic skills, students document their progress throughout the program. Audience responses to the students' work offer further insight into the impact of their learning.
Example:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/14yluyyLopBD3uBnSWUXpd2wxT4PgxObArkcd_VzKX_g/edit?usp=sharing

Visitor Reaction Form Example: https://forms.gle/KoN4S3wutM5CtQPY9

Quantitative metrics involve tracking participation, the completion of creative projects and repeated engagement in activities. These metrics help to measure both the reach and effectiveness of the educational content.

Process for hiring, training, and evaluating my performance/effectiveness.

To train and evaluate my own performance and effectiveness, I engage in continuous professional development and self-reflection. My degree in secondary education and teaching experience in public schools have been pivotal in helping me critically examine my own privilege and biases within an imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalistic, patriarchal society. These experiences have driven me to embrace a lifelong commitment to understanding culturally sustaining pedagogy and trauma-informed teaching practices.

I actively pursue ongoing learning through trainings and certifications from organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), Breath Liberation Society, and Trauma Resilient Communities. These programs deepen my understanding of how colonial literacy domination, the White Gaze, and linguistic attitudes shape educational environments. I integrate differentiated instruction and offer students multiple ways to express their ideas and creativity, ensuring that diverse learners feel seen and valued.

Part of my professional growth involves studying the needs of youth facing challenging life conditions, including those who are unhoused, grappling with substance abuse, or living with PTSD. These experiences offer me critical insights into intersectionality and how to better address diverse access needs in my classroom and artistic spaces. Additionally, I stay current by attending workshops and certifications on racial justice such as those offered by Listen, Learn, Act.

For self-evaluation, I engage in regular reflection on my practice. I analyze feedback from participants and colleagues, use peer observations, and review student outcomes. I also incorporate self-assessment tools to gauge the effectiveness of my teaching strategies, particularly in creating a trauma-sensitive, inclusive environment. My commitment to mindfulness helps me regularly assess my emotional presence and effectiveness in fostering a supportive space for participants.

In every program I lead, I implement participant feedback surveys and maintain a reflective journal to track my growth. I adapt my teaching methods based on the needs and feedback of the individuals I work with, ensuring that I continue to evolve as an educator and artist.

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

To ensure inclusion of participants from all backgrounds and abilities in my programming, I use a combination of culturally responsive teaching principles, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and the Affirming Racial Equity Tool. These frameworks guide my curriculum design to ensure equitable access to learning, creative expression, and participation for all students, regardless of their background, ability, or identity.

Using Heuristic for Thinking About Culturally Responsive Teaching (HiTCRiT), I create culturally relevant instruction that reflects the diverse experiences of both the participants and myself as the lead artist. I activate students' prior knowledge and experiences, making learning contextual and drawing examples from their cultural backgrounds. This allows students to engage in lessons that feel familiar and affirm their identities. For example, when we discuss social and political issues, I integrate texts and art from various cultural perspectives, giving students the opportunity to see themselves reflected in the curriculum (mirrors) and to explore the experiences of others (windows).

UDL principles ensure that my programming is accessible to students of all learning styles and abilities. I provide multiple ways for students to engage with the content, whether through text, audio, visual, or kinesthetic activities. Lessons are designed with a variety of formats to cater to diverse learning preferences. For students with different needs, whether due to disability, trauma, or language barriers, I make learning accessible by adapting both content and instruction.

In addition, I provide choices and accommodations in learning tasks, allowing students to select activities that resonate with them and sustain engagement. This flexibility supports autonomy and helps students take ownership of their learning experience. The materials I use and the tasks I design validate underrepresented groups by affirming their identities and positioning their cultures as valuable and significant. For example, I incorporate texts and resources that challenge oppressive structures, encouraging students to critically examine power, privilege, and bias in their communities and the broader world.

Lastly, I intentionally foster a community of learners through cooperative learning strategies and shared responsibilities. By creating a classroom culture that is affirming of all racial, cultural, and gender identities, I build a supportive environment where students feel seen and valued. Through a combination of inclusive pedagogy and empowering classroom culture, I strive to ensure that every student can participate fully in the program and grow both academically and creatively.

How do I engage teachers and community center staff before, during, and after programming?

Before Programming
-Schedule meetings with teachers and staff to understand their goals, challenges, and needs for their students or participants.
-Site visits are planned to build relationships with the staff, teachers, and students; as well as, to familiarize myself with the space, flow, and site logistics.

-Involve teachers and staff in the planning process, inviting their input on lesson plans, curriculum adjustments, or logistical details. T
-Share my approach (e.g., arts integration, mindfulness, trauma-informed pedagogy) so teachers and staff can understand the educational and emotional framework of the programming.
-Establish regular communication channels (e.g. emails, group chats) to ensure teachers and staff feel informed and supported leading up to the program. Materials or guides are provided to introduce your programming to students or participants in advance.
During Programming
-Engage teachers and staff as active participants in sessions. Invite them to co-facilitate or observe activities, giving them firsthand experience of methods and tools used.
-Offer opportunities for staff or teachers to share feedback on activities, making small adjustments that support their expertise and understanding of their students.
-Hold regular check-ins with teachers and staff throughout the program to discuss how students or participants are engaging, what's working well, and any challenges they're observing.
-Reflective conversations with teachers and staff are encouraged after key sessions to assess the impact and share insights on student learning and engagement.
-If welcome, suggestions are provided for integrating programming into the teachers' or staff's daily activities or future lessons.
-Partner with teachers and staff to celebrate participant growth.
After Programming
-Invite teachers and staff to reflect and share and discuss outcomes, lessons learned, and areas for future improvement. Share data (both qualitative and quantitative) on the program's success and impact.
-Provide resources and materials for teachers and staff to continue using programming elements (i.e. mindfulness exercises, writing prompts, community-building exercises) if desired.
-Share art that I've created based on my experiences working with their students during the residency. Example: https://mailchi.mp/4d19a8fae155/kfwannounces-2022-loretto-residency-artists-9449783?e=e631f6c29d
-Share day, performance, or exhibit to celebrate the students' art and growth.
-Maintain open communication after the program ends, checking in periodically.

How do I engage participants in the creative and learning process?

Participant-Centered Approach: I use a participant-centered approach, allowing participants to contribute to the decision-making process and take ownership of their creative journey. This is particularly important when deciding their focus on emergent themes related to community and social change. Through devising techniques, participants share their unique stories using multi-modal expressions, including visual art, drama, poetry, and sound. This process not only honors their lived experiences but also empowers them to take creative control of how they express these stories.

Choice: Empowering participants through choice is central to fostering engagement. I provide opportunities for them to select the art form or topic that resonates most deeply with them, whether

it's through visual art, performance, writing, or music. This autonomy allows participants to feel a sense of ownership over their work, making the creative process more meaningful and personal.

Creating Community and Collaboration: Building a sense of community and collaboration is foundational to both creative and learning engagement. I do this by incorporating artistic outlets such as drama-based activities, collaborative collage, performance planning, or songwriting. These collaborative activities help participants step out of their comfort zones and create an environment where they feel safe to express vulnerability and explore new ideas. Through ensemble-building activities, participants work together, offering support and learning from one another, fostering a community rooted in shared trust and mutual respect.

Trauma-Informed, Arts-Integrated Pedagogy: The pedagogical framework of the program is trauma-informed, arts integration, and project-based learning. This approach acknowledges the diverse backgrounds of participants and creates an inclusive and sensitive environment where they can express themselves freely. Participants use art to process and express emotions, linking their personal experiences to broader social change and community-based themes.

Self-Reflection and Metacognition: I incorporate activities that provide opportunities for self-reflection, allowing participants to connect their internal experiences to their external expression. This reflective process supports both their metacognitive development—understanding how they think and learn—and their ability to regulate their emotions. By encouraging self-awareness and emotional literacy, participants are better equipped to engage authentically and thoughtfully with the world around them. By intertwining creative expression with critical reflection and collaboration, participants not only grow artistically but also develop deeper emotional and social awareness. This engagement allows them to connect personal narratives to larger societal issues, fostering both individual growth and community impact.