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# Cruise Presenters

## AACSea and LiteraSEA

### Caroline Musselwhite



#### Speaker Bio:

Dr. Caroline Musselwhite is an assistive technology and literacy consultant with more than 50 years of experience working with children, adolescents, and adults with multiple challenges in a variety of settings, including Head Start, clinics, developmental day programs, homes, and the public schools. Dr. Musselwhite has written a number of textbooks and “how-to” books on a range of topics, and has authored many books and software programs for youth with disabilities. She has taught courses at several universities and presented thousands of workshops throughout North and South America, Australia, Europe, and Africa. She has also supported Communication Circles and Comprehensive Literacy Clubs in multiple cities in the US and Canada. Honors include: Foundation Fellowship (West Virginia University), Educator of the Year (Association for Retarded Citizens, North Carolina), Honors of the Association, (North Carolina Augmentative Communication Association), DiCarlo Outstanding Clinician Award (North Carolina Speech-Language-Hearing Association), and ISAAC Fellow.

#### Session Name:

**AAC Mentors: Finding and Supporting Budding Mentors**

#### Session Description:

AAC mentors are individuals who use AAC and can become role models for others who are learning to use AAC systems. Mentors do not need to be highly skilled – we have found that anyone using AAC who is a bit more adept at using their system than their mentees can be extremely helpful. Mentors can help beginning AAC users ‘get’ the power of AAC, family members (and educators!) can develop a ‘vision’ of using AAC, and being a mentor can be highly motivating. This session will share examples of how we have identified potential mentors and supported them in growing their skills.

## Krista Howard



**Speaker Bio:** As a lifelong AAC user, Krista Howard has utilized various communication devices since the age of five due to a disability affecting her speech and the use of her left arm. Her personal experiences have fueled her passion for assisting others with complex communication needs. Krista has served as an AAC Technician at Gompers, a day program where she provided peer-to-peer modeling and support for other AAC users. She has also been involved in mentoring, training, and support roles across various settings, including teletherapy, classrooms, and adult day programs. Her contributions extend to presenting at numerous conferences, sharing her insights and experiences to promote effective AAC implementation.

Krista is a single mother to her son, with whom she enjoys activities. She is also pursuing higher education, working towards a bachelor's degree in Education Studies at Arizona State University and enrolled in the Speech-Language Pathology Assistant (SLPA) program at Northern Arizona University. Her ambition is to become the first SLPA who is an AAC user. She has also been involved in mentoring, training, and support roles across various settings, including teletherapy, classrooms, and adult day programs.

### Session Name:

#### **Both Sides of the Device: Perspectives from an AAC User and SLPA**

### Session Description:

Join Krista Howard, an AAC user and Speech-Language Pathology Assistant (SLPA), as she shares her unique perspective from both sides of the device. Krista offers insight into what it means to live as an AAC user while also supporting others in their communication journeys as an SLPA. Through personal stories, practical strategies, and peer modeling experiences, this session highlights the importance of authentic connection, empowerment, and inclusion in AAC practice. Participants will leave with a deeper understanding of how to support AAC users with respect, empathy, and real-world communication goals.

## Gretchen Hanser

**Speaker Bio:** Gretchen has worked in the field of assistive technology and literacy for students with significant disabilities for over 25 years. She is an educator and an occupational therapist. She has worked in a variety of settings developing model classrooms and school based assistive technology centers, providing teacher and related services trainings, participating in assessment teams and working directly with students and staff in the classroom. Gretchen has taught university classes and presents nationally and internationally on these subjects. She is currently the Director of Assistive Technology and Literacy Instruction at the International Academy of Hope in New York City.



### Session Name:

**All Aboard! - Assessing Changes in Writing for Students with Multiple Disabilities using Alternative Pencils**

### Session Description:

From the very start, writing is an unquestioned component of literacy development for children without disabilities. However, for students with multiple disabilities, unknown cognitive skills, significant physical disabilities and vision challenges, writing is often impossible due to their many challenges. "Alternative pencils" are accessible tools that allow these students to generate text. Professionals are learning how to technically use these tools with their students. However, less is known about the activities and what progress looks like for these very beginning writers. This session will highlight writing activities, strategies and ways to informally assess change using writing samples and observational data.

## Erin Sheldon

### Speaker Bio:

Erin Sheldon works to maximize opportunities for learning for students with complex needs. As the Director of Learning Design for AssistiveWare, she helps equip schools and educators to teach language, AAC, and literacy to emergent students. In her first career, Erin was a union and community organizer. Then her eldest child was born with multiple disabilities. In 2009, Erin returned to graduate school and started a second career in the AAC field. She now leverages her lived experience as a parent and organizer to bring insight, compassion, and practical knowledge to the AAC field. Erin has presented professional learning to a wide range of educators, clinicians, and families in over a dozen countries. She has authored book chapters, articles, manuals, and internet modules on AAC implementation and emergent literacy instruction. These days, Erin's biggest passion is making vocabulary instruction accessible and meaningful to all students.



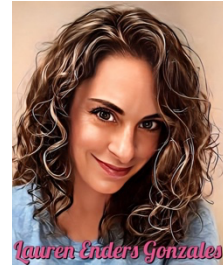
### Session Name:

#### **What does it mean to know a word?**

### Session Description

Teaching the words in an AAC system is often reduced to modeling core words, and vocabulary assessment is often reduced to simple identification tasks. We might assume a user "knows" a word only when they use it expressively. But word knowledge is fascinating and complex! This session will first dive into research on what it means to know a word. Next, we will practice simple routines to build rich receptive and expressive vocabularies for AAC learners. Come explore how we can give true access to the vocabulary they need to learn, engage, and thrive!

## Lauren Enders Gonzales



### Speaker Bio:

Lauren Enders Gonzales, MA, CCC-SLP, is a licensed and ASHA-certified speech-language pathologist and special educator with nearly 30 years of experience in Eastern Pennsylvania schools.

Lauren is the founder and president of Engaging AAC Solutions, LLC, a newly formed (2024) consulting business offering professional development, coaching, resource creation, and social media content creation. Known for her user-friendly online and print resources, eye-catching visual supports, and interactive presentation style, Lauren is a sought-after speaker at local, national, and international conferences and events, including Closing the Gap, ATIA, ISAAC, and ASHA.

### Session Name:

## Supporting REAL Communication—Even When AAC Progress Feels Stalled

### Session Description:

Feeling discouraged by AAC progress that seems slow, stalled, or like your learner just isn't interested in communicating? You're not alone. This encouraging yet practical session is designed for anyone who supports an AAC user and wants to prove that progress is possible!

### You'll Learn How To:

- Spot subtle but powerful communication "glimmers"
- Respond with patience, encouragement, and renewed commitment to supporting *authentic* communication
- Use low-pressure, real-life tools and strategies

**You'll leave with** an updated mindset, new skills, and renewed confidence, *plus* a digital resource containing:

- Free/low-cost tools that work
- Real-world, doable strategies

## Mail Ling Chan

### Speaker Bio:

Mai Ling is a speech-language pathologist, industry historian, global connector, invited presenter, and technology entrepreneur. Building on a lifetime of entrepreneurial experience, she focuses on supporting disability-focused thought leaders and building a global ecosystem to support inclusivity and accessibility through her Exceptional Leaders Network membership.



### Session Name:

## **The Future of AAC: Emerging Technologies and Authentic Voices**

### Session Description:

This session explores new directions in Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), focusing on both technological progress and individual leadership. Participants will examine how new and exciting options, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Brain Computer Interface, are broadening access and meeting unique communication needs. The session also emphasizes the significant influence of people who use AAC, whose stories, shared through memoirs, social media, and presentations, offer practical insight and encourage deeper understanding and inclusion. By considering both emerging tools and personal perspectives, participants will gain a balanced view of how AAC is advancing and how authentic voices are shaping the future of communication support.

## Brandi Wentland



### Speaker Bio:

Brandi Wentland is a speech-language pathologist specializing in AAC and the founder of *We Speak AAC, LLC*. She provides AAC evaluations, training and ongoing therapy in Arizona through Therapy One. Brandi has served as adjunct faculty at California State University, Chico, teaching AAC coursework. Brandi co-authored chapters in *Becoming an AAC Leader* and *Supporting Individuals Who Use Augmentative and Alternative Communication: Breaking Down Opportunity Barriers*. As a board member of the Nika Project and an international speaker, she is dedicated to expanding AAC access and education around the world.

### Session Name:

## **Visualizing Vocabulary: Empowering Emerging Readers through Semantic Mapping with AAC**

### Session Description:

Empower emerging readers who use AAC by teaching vocabulary through semantic mapping. Learn how to create symbol-rich word webs, model connections in AAC systems, and embed target words into meaningful literacy and play experiences. This session, led by Brandi Wentland, features Krista Howard—the first full-time AAC user and SLPA—who provides peer-led insights and interactive modeling. Krista actively uses these strategies as a co-leader in group sessions, offering powerful examples of how AAC users can support one another in building language and literacy. Inspired by leaders like Gail Van Tatenhove, Amanda Soper, and Erin Sheldon, this session blends evidence-based practice with real-world success.