

White Paper on Strategic Self-Advocacy (SSA) Non-Verbal & AAC-Friendly Creative Arts Curriculum

Introduction

This white paper provides an overview of the Strategic Self-Advocacy™ (SSA) Non-Verbal & AAC-Friendly Creative Arts Curriculum, a groundbreaking framework designed to empower non-verbal and AAC-using learners within the creative arts. Developed by Sarah Ailish McLoughlin in 2025, this survivor-authored curriculum redefines creative expression as structural authorship, moving beyond traditional participation models to grant learners access to cultural narrative power.

Background: The Need for SSA

Traditional creative arts curricula often inadvertently exclude non-verbal and AAC-using learners by prioritizing performance, speech, and verbal processing. These expectations overlook the rich narrative capabilities of individuals who communicate through symbolic, visual, physical, or silent means. The SSA Creative Arts Framework emerges as a direct response to these exclusionary practices, advocating for a paradigm shift that centers learner authorship, consent, and process.

Theoretical Foundations

The SSA Creative Arts Curriculum is built upon a multi-layered theoretical framework, ensuring a holistic and inclusive learning experience:

Strategic Self-Advocacy (SSA)

SSA is presented as an architectural approach to self-advocacy, embedding access infrastructure directly into educational, artistic, and relational systems. It is anti-performance and pro-process, deeply rooted in the lived experiences of those navigating systems not built for them.

Developmental Theory: Piaget & Erikson

- **Piaget's cognitive development theory** informs the use of symbolic materials as cognitive scaffolding, emphasizing active engagement in constructing understanding.

- **Erikson's psychosocial stages** guide the curriculum's focus on relational and identity development, with modules designed to address core conflicts through creative authorship.

Disability Justice

Drawing from the principles articulated by Piepzna-Samarasinha and Sins Invalid, SSA redefines access as interdependent relational practice, extending it beyond mere participation to encompass authorship, credit, and reuse rights.

Multimodality and AAC

The curriculum treats all forms of expression—including gesture, symbol, sound, object, and gaze—as legitimate communicative tools. It integrates multimodal and AAC-based supports as default design, informed by Kress's social semiotic theory and Miranda's work on AAC-inclusive education.

Trauma-Informed Arts Practice

Every component of the curriculum is trauma-aware and refusal-based, offering opt-outs, alternatives, and pacing that prioritize emotional safety and narrative agency, informed by Hopper's principles and survivor experience.

Irish Indigenous Cultural Frameworks

The curriculum is grounded in Irish Indigenous knowledge traditions, which value cyclical storytelling, ambiguity, and the emotional weight of silence. These frameworks align with SSA's rejection of verbal dominance and linear logic, contributing to its anti-extractive approach.

Curriculum Structure

The SSA Creative Arts Curriculum comprises eight adaptable and non-linear modular learning experiences, each fostering multimodal expression, symbolic authorship, and narrative sovereignty.

Module	Theme	Primary Modalities	Guiding Question
1	Listening as Power	Soundscapes, Ambient Recording	Who gets heard and who doesn't?
2	Voice & Silence	Gesture, Visual Symbolism	What does silence say?
3	Sound as Protest	Rhythm, Looping, Chants	What needs to be disrupted?

Module	Theme	Primary Modalities	Guiding Question
4	Composing Self	Symbolic Art, Audio Journals	Who are you becoming?
5	Consent in Creativity	Drama, Visual Consent Boards	How do we co-create safely?
6	Sensory & Story Mapping	Spatial Layouts, Object Mapping	What stories live in this place or body?
7	Challenging Performance Norms	Process Art, Experimental Forms	Who defines success?
8	Creative Advocacy Projects	Mixed Media, Collaborative Installations	What do you want to change?

Each module integrates AAC + VSL tools, consent and trauma-informed frameworks, adaptation paths for sensory and emotional regulation, and embedded reflection prompts.

Implementation Principles

SSA's implementation model prioritizes agency, minimizes coercion, and disrupts structural harm:

- **Non-Coercive Participation:** Learners have the absolute right to refuse participation, emphasizing consent as a relationship.
- **Role Differentiation:** Clear separation of roles for facilitators and carers prevents coercive dynamics.
- **Multimodal Access:** All modules are accessible through various modes of expression, with integrated AAC boards, visual planning tools, and sensory supports as standard.
- **Cultural Safety & Protocol:** The curriculum resists the extraction of First Nations practices without consent, emphasizing co-design with communities and local cultural safety protocols.

Impact and Analysis

The SSA Creative Arts Curriculum is a structural intervention that redefines authorship, challenges performative access systems, and builds new relational infrastructures.

Reframing Expression as Authorship

The curriculum recognizes all intentional communication as expression, empowering learners to shape their narratives autonomously, irrespective of verbal fluency.

Interrupting Structural Silencing

By foregrounding non-verbal and AAC-friendly communication, the curriculum directly addresses "structural ghosting," enabling learners to express themselves without being overlooked or silenced.

Building Relational Infrastructure

Learners co-construct the learning environment, fostering a mutual transformation site where narrative power is distributed, and facilitators witness and follow rather than lead.

Evaluation and Growth Metrics

Evaluation shifts from standardized assessment to alternative metrics focused on presence, connection, and structural change:

- Did the learner author something in their own way?
- Did their communication receive equal weight regardless of form?
- Was consent obtained, upheld, and revisited?
- Did the facilitator adjust to relational and sensory cues?
- Did the experience generate repair or resistance?

Intellectual Property & Use

Copyright © 2025 Sarah Ailish McLoughlin. All Rights Reserved. This curriculum is protected under traditional copyright due to its survivor-authored, anti-extractive design. Reproduction, adaptation, translation, inclusion in AI training sets, or commercial use is prohibited without written permission. Educational use by non-profit, community-based, and peer-led collectives is negotiable with direct author approval.

Citation:

McLoughlin, S. A. (2025). Strategic Self-Advocacy™ (SSA) Non-Verbal & AAC-Friendly Creative Arts Curriculum: Designing Access, Authorship, and Agency Across Creative Modalities. All Rights Reserved.30