And That's the Way It Is:
Explorations of Philosophical Authority

Kathleen Knight Abowitz
Miami University

My first decision about convention involves using the first word in this sentence. My. Signaling the subjective, personal, and flawed, it is a decision about how I acknowledge the presence of self. The second decision regarding convention involves how I address the author of the essay to which I am responding. I know this person well enough to call her Audrey, and perhaps even well enough to give her a hug when I see her annually. Here, in the spirit of unreliability, I choose the convention that reveals these relations: nonphilosophically, I refer to her as Audrey. Keep this little experiment with un-convention in mind; see how it plays on your thinking as you read these remarks. Keep in mind what I risk, and how I am interpreted, in this move.

Convention structures much of our life. Convention refers to the customary way things are done within a group, repeating and maintaining group norms, solidarities, exclusions, traditions, and human bonds. We rely on conventions even as we might wish to break free of them.

When I was a child, Walter Cronkite narrated the nightly news on CBS. Each evening, he concluded with the mantra, "And that's the way it is, Monday, August 17, 1969." Cronkite was a distinguished white gentleman whose gentle, serious demeanor inspired trust in people like us — white southerners who saw the world turning upside down. We could handle hearing about it from Cronkite, whose authority and conventions appeased and comforted us. I can now imagine working-class African Americans in my Virginia home town watching that same evening newscast, hearing the familiar "And that's the way it is," and angrily talking back to the screen — "no, that's *not* the way it is around here. Where was your coverage of the news, the views, the stories that pertain to *people like me?*" The reliability of Cronkite appeased and appealed to some viewers even as it provided no forum or voice for other kinds of viewers. And this point, and how it relates to philosophical writing and teaching, is what I take to be Audrey's focus here.

In her essay, Audrey tells us her project is primarily aimed at antiracist scholars. But her essay is also suggestive of wider use — or perhaps it is only my own imagination that compels me to see how far we might go with this un-convention. She argues that it might be useful for any marginalized group of readers who have traditionally read about themselves and their problems in third-person terms. Audrey states, "I am primarily addressing antiracist white scholars like myself, but there may be implications of this work for progressive scholars of color as well." Since there are only a handful of scholars who fit this description in the Philosophy of Education Society (and more's the pity), I wonder if Audrey indeed is suggesting something larger, more expansive, and more radical than she cares to admit, reliably

or not. Audrey's essay compels me to explore the uses and limits of un-conventions like the unreliable narrator that "trouble the faith" in the philosopher of education.

In the Foundations undergraduate course that I regularly teach, Audrey's invitation to play with the authority of the professor-philosopher is opportune, but not because my students are socially marginalized. My students — mostly white and upper-middle-class — are steeped in and successful with the conventions of school life and learning. They think, but they have a hard time with the parts of thinking that require the work of imagination. Case in point: almost to a person, they find progressive philosophies to be more palatable and relevant to their own ways of thinking about teaching and learning, but, almost to a person, they cannot imagine working in a school in which essentialism is not center stage. A few weeks ago we read an essay by David Labaree regarding how the private goals of social mobility and consumerism are driving the U.S. educational agenda.[1] The students understood the arguments, in the sense of more or less agreeing with the moral critiques of our present state of affairs. But, for the life of them, they could not imagine an alternative. So when Audrey calls us "to both use and undercut our authoritativeness," I see my privileged undergraduate classroom as a perfect place to do so, if it can "provide students with tools, spaces, and resources for thinking along channels other than those that we have cut for them." My students suffer the burden of privilege in their inability to see any alternate state of affairs. I experiment with various strategies for engaging their imaginations — aesthetics projects, creative writing, and textual analysis built on interpretive and critical skills — but my occasional pleasures in occupying the role of "sage on the stage" interfere, too, as Audrey suggests. In the meager three hours of the undergraduate teacher education curriculum devoted to the Social Foundations, I have precious little time to share with them the wonders of Du Bois, the rage of Margaret Haley or George Counts, the secrets of the hidden curriculum, the radical power of the ethic of care. At times I use my authority and ego to show them these worlds, but I am too much of a critical pragmatist to successfully play the sage for long. I am interested in getting students to think, and to think imaginatively, so I take Audrey's suggestions for unreliability as a promising teaching strategy.

Besides the students I teach, I am affiliated with publics who lie outside my institution. The state of Ohio, and specifically the elected and appointed state legislators and education officials, also constitutes a public of which I am part. Unlike my students, however, this particular public is neither unimaginative nor lethargic about seeing alternative educational possibilities. Many of the educational and political leaders in my state have imagined our educational futures, and philosophers of education are not part of their utopian landscape. Policy makers and the people that elect and finance them are additional publics with whom I am affiliated. In stark contrast to the students I teach, I wield absolutely no authority with these publics. In fact, as a professor in a university, particularly as an education professor, I occupy a low status with many lawmakers and publics in my state. According to these lawmakers, who have recently mandated a course called "Introduction to Education" that is to supplant the Social Foundations course, there

is no such thing as philosophy of education. Instead, our Introduction to Education course must cover six set themes, in the name of "transferability" of courses across public institutions in my state. The themes are standards-based education, professionalization, diversity, democratic issues/social justice, curriculum and instruction, and legal and organizational issues. The purpose of the course is thus described: "Candidates engage in a variety of experiences that broadly explore the purposes of schools in society and the knowledge, dispositions, and performances required to be an effective teacher today."[2] The course description and themes do not mention the disciplines of philosophy or history, nor the role of critical and normative *inquiry* into the purposes of schooling. They imagine teachers who have the correct "dispositions" and can enact the right "performances" to teach.

Transfer modules that further de-philosophize teacher education point toward a compelling question: Are philosophers already unreliable narrators in the sense that we deal with a nonempirical subject matter that for many is not worth talking about in scholarly terms in a positivistic world? In that sense, should our project be about building reliability, specifically with nonstudent audiences such as educators, policy makers, and the larger public?

"Building reliability" sounds as though persuasive logic will be enough to woo powerful Ohioans in Columbus into believing that educational philosophers and theorists are worth keeping around. I don't believe this, but neither do I believe the reverse: that persuasive argument and logic are fruitless. Compelling argument, sensitively and powerfully communicated to many constituencies, builds a better understanding of who we are, what we do, and what is important about philosophical inquiry and thinking among educators. Reliability will be an important component of making those arguments and building those cases, but not necessarily the reliability of a so-called "bloodless" academic. I want philosophers to be more reliable, not in the sense of 'dependable" or "always right" or "without human foible and perspective," but in the sense of trustworthiness. Trust is earned through consistent engagement with others in actions defined by mutual regard. How do we "regard" our audiences, our students, their communities, and our legislators? How do we take their needs and interests into better account? This particular question is also the question that drives Audrey's essay, and thus my response echoes her essay. An echo is not a real voice but an unreliable illusion of one, and therefore perhaps a very fine way to commend, and extend, her essay.

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1. David F. Labaree, "Resisting Educational Standards," in *Readings in Sociocultural Studies in Education,* 5th ed., ed. Kathleen Knight Abowitz and Kate Rousmaniere (Dubuque, Iowa: McGraw-Hill Custom Publishing, 2002), 229–235.

2. Ohio Transfer Articulation Guide (TAG) for Education, November 23, 2004.