

Review Essay: In the Internet Age, Who Needs Textbooks?

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Moxley, Joseph, ed. *Writing Commons: The Home for Writers*. Joseph Moxley, n.d. Web. 1 July 2013.

Rhetoric and Composition WikiBook. N.p., n.d. Web. 1 July 2013.

Forty-five years ago, James Moffett wrote, “a lot of what is in textbooks should be in books for teachers, and is in fact partly there to educate them, not the students” (209). His argument then was in response to what he saw as the lack of widespread expertise in the teaching of writing, so he reasoned that as our understanding of writing and its teaching improved, the textbook would become less central. After all, for Moffett, textbooks muck up the works when what a writing class should focus on entirely is students’ writing (210). However, he predicted that textbooks would become more powerful rather than less because the investment was too great by all involved—publishers’ incentive for profit, faculty’s familiarity with a particular textbook’s approach, and administrators’ normalizing of curricula (210).

Today, textbooks still permeate higher education, whether in the writing classroom or in other disciplines. According to the National Association of College Stores, an “average of \$420 was spent on new [\$296] and used [\$124] course materials” per student for the 2011–2012 school year (“Higher Education”), and this, of course, does not account for offsite sales of textbooks, either used or new. Moffett’s prediction seems to hold true. That said, precise numbers on composition textbook sales and use is complicated. There is no comprehensive study on how textbooks are used in composition classrooms, and very little data exists from specific studies; the 2011 WPA-CompPile Research Bibliography only lists two studies from the 1990s (Rendleman). So many studies have analyzed composition textbooks

as texts—their approaches, their histories (e.g., Connors, “Textbooks”; Connors, “Rise and Fall”); their theoretical underpinnings (e.g., Gale and Gale; Knoblauch)—that it is peculiar to see so little published about how the intended audience actually uses the textbook. However, if the intended audience still is the teacher, the textbook exists as a record of the discipline and could account for why these studies look at the text rather than how it is used.

I open with these two issues—the composition textbook’s role and its audience—because they are wrapped up in the self-perpetuating circle of complicit publisher, student, teacher, and administrator that Moffett argued should, but would not be, broken. However, there is a new challenge in how information is delivered to students, and it is beyond the traditional classroom. In fact, the recent Chapter 11 bankruptcy filing from Cengage Learning specifically blames the “consistent decline over the last decade in demand for new printed materials, which traditionally was the primary driver of profitability in the Company’s industry” (5). It might sound quaint or naïve to call what has been evolving over the last two decades a “new” challenge, but that is often how cultural change occurs—slowly over time. The recent Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) interest is a response not only to the increased efficiency of accessing information online, but also to a generation that has grown up accessing information with “immediacy and hypermediacy” (Bolter and Grusin 5–6). At last count, 83 universities, libraries, and museums have partnered with Coursera, an online education company that hosts lectures and content on a variety of topics (“Partners”), and this says nothing of those universities that host their own course content or have developed their own services such as Harvard and MIT’s edX. The medium of learning is shifting from the required textbook to the Internet-at-large.

Such a challenge offers many opportunities in changing the textbook’s role and its audience, but most relevant here are the promising opportunities for the online textbook. The most obvious opportunity is that the online textbook is not bound by the page: it can link outside/within itself. The online textbook is also native hypermedia, so video, audio, and images can be more actively embedded. The online textbook also provides opportunities for more fluid revision through commentary and collaboration. The online textbook more easily affords customizing the book for a particular course or group of students. There is much promise within these opportunities, not the least of which is the possibility for the online textbook to be free for students, even as we might recognize that this removes what little financial incentive exists for those who write these books.

There are two open and online textbooks of note, neither of which is new, but both of which are newly relevant for the pedagogical shifts that are occurring in higher education. There are other online textbooks; to be sure, many others, depending on how one defines a textbook. After all, searching YouTube for “how to write an essay” will net 487,000 results. And there are online textbooks specifically for writing such as *The Informed Writer* by Charles Bazerman, *The Process of Research Writing* by Steven Krause, and two volumes of *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing* edited by Charlie Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky, but these are instances of print materials placed online for ease of access and not written for the web. My interest here is in two web-based, open online textbooks that are intended to have a unified approach to writing, in this case instruction based on procedural or experiential knowledge: *Writing Commons* and *Rhetoric and Composition WikiBook*.

Writing Commons began as *College Writing Online*, an online text of over 300 webtexts written by Joseph Moxley and published by Pearson in 2003. When the copyright was returned to Moxley in 2008, he decided to make the text freely available, additionally opening it up as a crowd sourced or peer produced website, consisting now of a twenty-person editorial board and sixteen-person review board (*Writing Commons*, “FAQs”). Currently, the website holds over 500 webtexts that cover topics in seven major categories: information literacy, research methods and methodologies, writing processes, collaboration, genre, new media, and style. It also notes, under its Applications page, that it has been used in three writing MOOCs.

The Summary page situates the approach of the text as rhetorical instruction: it lists “thinking rhetorically,” “common organizational patterns,” and “format rhetorically.” Although Richard Fulkerson classified such rhetorical genre instruction as “procedural rhetoric” (671), this term has been more widely used to refer to the rhetoric of rules and procedures in game studies. I prefer “procedural knowledge” (Fulkerson 671), which captures the axiology of *Writing Commons* more precisely. Within each of the primary sections, there is an overview and then a series of internal webtext links that connect additional articles within that particular section and across sections. For example, within the “Information Literacy” section, there are articles on the Aristotelian rhetorical appeals, namely logos, ethos, and pathos. In various places across the other sections of the website, there are occasional links back to this definition of ethos. However, there are oversights that lead to confusing moments in the website for readers. Within the section on Genres, under Business Proposal, logos, ethos, and pathos are defined anew in a more limited way than the major sections on these appeals in the Information Literacy section. This issue is a problem with

peer produced texts, and while an ideal argument might be that the diversity of voices leads to an enriched text, it more often leads to an inconsistent and contradictory text—after all, in the case of ethos above, the definition that appears on its webtext offers at least two approaches, intrinsic authority and borrowed credibility and an additional link on fallacies of ethos, none of which the section on business proposals even considers. However, as a website claiming to offer a unified rhetorical approach, it might be more interesting for it to provide additional discussion of approaches to ethos that are consistent, or at least link to one another, rather than offering yet another definition. In either case, the focus of ethos that the authors present seems limited. They describe intrinsic authority and borrowed credibility well but neglect discussing those parts of ethos like establishing goodwill or common ground, additional ethical concepts that would seem important for a business proposal if not other texts.

Writing Commons holds many external links as well. Throughout the webtext, there are links to videos hosted by YouTube on topics ranging from research from UCLA or Emory University, to remix videos from the *Journal of Undergraduate Research* hosted at UT Austin, to articles on writing topics from eHow. These videos are hodgepodge. What is most problematic in this hodgepodge is that there is usually no commentary from *Writing Commons* about these videos; they merely appear within the flow of the text. There is neither context nor indication as to how a student or a teacher should read these videos. For example, the introduction of genres reasonably discusses how genres, even those we think of as common, have evolved over time and will continue to evolve. However, the video link in that section is from eHow and defines genres as Alexander Bain might—that is, the modes of discourse (e.g., descriptive, expository, narrative, persuasive, poetry and technical writing). Once again, this contradiction disrupts the webtext in a negative way. Given the open nature of the website, a new video might be included or even designed expressly for this section. At least, some context about the modes of discourse and their relationship to genres of practice might be included for the video.

Writing Commons also offers a rubric of suggestions for student writers called “Common Comments.” There are seven common categories of such comments, based on a 2012 study of teacher comments from 26,000 essays at the University of South Florida: Focus, Evidence, Organization, Style, Format, MLA, and APA. Such things as “clarify vague pronoun references” and “avoid the use of unsupported opinions as evidence” lead to parts of the website that provide further information on such topics. But these comments, despite their origins from the study of common feedback on students’ texts, are oddly arhetorical given the rhetorical focus of the

website in general. After all, what amounts to evidence or style or format is entirely based on the rhetorical situation, so a “common” comment seems to miss the point.

These inconsistencies might be compensated for in a classroom setting with discussion and much needed context, but if *Writing Commons* represents a textbook that might be used for a MOOC or for improving one’s understanding of writing before or in lieu of a college education, then the message is no different than the open web in general—that is to say, a fragmented and contradictory cornucopia of ideas about writing with little evidence save just another link. Unfortunately for *Writing Commons*, there are the occasional errors in spelling and grammar so that, even as a clearing-house of sorts for writing instruction, there appear to be problems with its own ethos. This issue is acute given that Moxley writes that the text is for students and faculty (*Writing Commons*, “FAQ”). If, as Moffett suggested, one purpose of composition textbooks is to inform teachers who want to learn more about writing, the incongruities, problems with credibility, and lack of context in *Writing Commons* may undermine that goal by inscribing writing and its instruction more as advice and lore rather than as a carefully studied field of practice and research.

The other noteworthy online textbook, *Rhetoric and Composition Wikibook*, was started by Matt Barton, designed as a wiki project for an “upper-level undergraduate course called Computers and English” that Barton was teaching (187). Barton, aware that textbooks had a significant audience problem in that they were written for teachers rather than students, decided that having students write for students could alleviate some of the audience problem that textbooks had (187). He set up the project through Wikibooks, itself a project associated with Wikipedia to provide freely available and open textbooks for educational uses (*Wikibooks*, “About”). The *Rhetoric and Composition Wikibook* has since evolved and expanded its authorship in an unusual way. About fifty percent of the listed authors of the textbook are graduate students, twenty-five percent undergraduates, and twenty-five percent faculty (*Rhetoric and Composition Wikibook*, “Rhetoric and Composition Authors”). What makes this distribution of authors unusual is that now the website belies the intention of a site by and for undergraduate students. There are many moments where disciplinary assumptions about composition-rhetoric, holding little relevance for students, are inserted without context. Without citations, the website suffers the same problems as *Writing Commons* does for teachers.

The *Rhetoric and Composition Wikibook* textbook is divided into six sections: The Writing Process, Genres, Writing Applications, Advanced Topics, Grammar and Mechanics, and Teacher’s Handbook. There are over 70

webtexts on various subtopics. While *Writing Commons* offers numerous internal and external hyperlinks, *Rhetoric and Composition Wikibook* follows the familiar organization of Wikipedia. The wikibook includes some additional links at the end of many webtexts, but it provides very few internal links to pages within the site. Images are used, many with captions describing their source (a useful addition), but no videos or audio are present. Of course, such multimedia additions would not transfer to *Rhetoric and Composition Wikibook's* beneficial “print” feature: the website provides a link to download the entire book as a PDF for offline or ebook viewing of what amounts to a 346-page textbook with internal and external links preserved.

While *Writing Commons* offers a rhetorical focus, *Rhetoric and Composition Wikibook* seems to be a loose connection of standard textbook tropes, ironically mentioning very little about rhetoric save the means of writing a rhetorical analysis. The Writing Process section entails a familiar set of fixed steps from planning to publishing, yet it proclaims, “Since the 1970s, writing instructors have been teaching writing not as the following of fixed rules but rather as a dynamic process.” The modes of discourse, called Writing Applications here, are also presented in very familiar fashion. For example, the section on Description, as an application of writing, is extended here with advice on showing through descriptive language. Exposition is presented simply as an introduction, body and conclusion—a structure that might satisfy some rhetorical purposes but none of which is given any concrete example. In these cases, there are sample essays with analysis of what works well in each essay, but little seems to be connected to a particular assignment or purpose. The Advanced Topics section appears to be a place for certain genres of writing, covering writing in business, the humanities, and the sciences, but the specifics in the latter section amount to writing thesis-driven essays rather than actual science genres such as IMRAD (Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion) reports. While *Writing Commons* offers fairly approachable coverage of various types of field research (e.g., surveys and interviews) and the ethics associated with such research, *Rhetoric and Composition Wikibook* describes the processes of research as very much connected to traditions of text-based interpretation and synthesis. As a collaborative text with a version history page that lists pseudonymous Internet usernames rather than common names, it is difficult to surmise whether these familiar textbook moments are representative of the authors’ own experiences with writing for certain courses, their familiarity with textbooks about writing, or just general assumptions and lore about writing. In any case, the wikibook suggests an opportunity for further study as to how students perceive writing in different disciplines,

and whether the content that appears in these sections are actual threshold concepts or merely assumptions about what it means to write in the university.

The Internet age and open, online textbooks offer the potential for a significant shift in how we might approach the rhetorical situation, specifically, authorship. Both of these textbooks represent an opportunity for the reader to revise the textbook, thus, becoming another author. That I am writing this review rather than actively revising either of these editable texts illuminates a peculiar moment not only in the evolution of the textbook, but also in how and for whom we review such works. Our roles as teachers or WPAs have clearly been shown to be significant in changing what might appear in the traditional writing textbook (see Miles; Barrios), but these roles might become even more active and immediate with these or other online textbooks. *Writing Commons* and *Rhetoric and Composition Wikibook* are, by their very nature, works in progress, but that nature also entails the potential for them to become even more fragmented texts that might prove unusable without a great deal of context from teachers. Despite their intentions, these textbooks still fall into the problem of the two audience conundrum and a confusion of roles. Who are these textbooks written for, and what are those audiences supposed to do with them? The online textbook offers a still under-researched topic: that of how students (and faculty) use these textbooks. For example, online metrics derived from hotspot analysis, time spent reading, or linking/social media sharing might offer an interesting type of empirical evidence for how students read and interact with these texts. Although the potential for a textbook richer in media, more diverse in authorship, and free to students is a grand intention, the unrealized opportunities still outnumber the actualities—at least for now.

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