The textbook: a pedagogical moment

When we speak about new media, we must also speak about how we study and teach new media. I want to begin such a discussion with a quotation from Robert Atwan's *Convergences* (2002, xxxviii), a popular composition textbook whose thematic focus is new media.

We must develop an awareness of how media penetrates nearly everything we see and hear. We need to understand how one or another medium is always present, molding and filtering expression, even when it pretends to be invisible. Even when it disguises itself as reality.

Atwan’s remarks are informative for any number of reasons, but the most impressive meaning for me resides in its concentration on reading, not writing. As an introductory statement in a writing textbook, Atwan’s comments signify comprehension as the most vital component of new media study. Awareness of media construction, the quotation suggests, produces critical thinking. It’s hard to disagree with such sentiment, yet I am left wondering why a writing textbook interested in teaching new media stresses reading, and not writing itself?

There is a generalizeable lesson to be learned from a textbook like *Convergences*. I don’t mean to single out this specific textbook as an exception. Instead, *Convergences* allows me to refer to how textbook production, in general, currently treats new media. While Atwan
cautions students to recognize the constructed nature of media representation, his textbook—even though it is a writing textbook—does not address how students themselves can write in media environments. Even though Atwan’s advice is sandwiched between various images of web pages, advertisements, photographs, and other new media representations, no part of the textbook considers how such productions are rhetorically constructed. Are students to believe that these works are “written” elsewhere? Are they to believe that while they may eventually become empowered to decipher new media representations (with the assistance of the textbook), they will not be able to construct their own representations? Why does a new media textbook teach a print-based pedagogy (hermeneutical reading)? Why does it minimize issues of new media rhetorics; in other words, why doesn’t it teach a new media rhetorical approach to expression?

The origins of the composition textbook, of course, reside in rhetoric. The nineteenth-century shift from oral methods of information delivery and education dominant in the rhetorical tradition eventually yielded to print culture’s needs for students who could write, not just speak, persuasively. The subsequent emergence of the composition textbook as a pedagogical tool, according to Robert Connors (2003, 100–01), stems from the shift in the classroom from oral instruction (lecture) to print assessment (exercises performed through writing). Around the mid to late 1800s, rhetorical treatises, the dominant form of rhetorical instruction, began including question and answer sections as well as drills and exercises with each text’s chapters. Whereas students had once merely copied down a lecture and then recited it by heart, the new rhetoric demanded that students formulate their own compositions by learning from previous rhetorical examples how such compositions are constructed.

The conception grew that one learns to write by consciously learning ideas about writing and then practicing the application of these ideas. The story of the growth of composition textbooks is the story of the abstract and theoretical rhetoric that was the legacy of the treatise forcing itself into realms of skill development not easily comfortable to it. (Connors 2003, 106)

The invention of the composition textbook answered a late nineteenth-century need for instruction relevant to changes in communication.