

## Book Review

# Review of Angela Laflen's *Critical Data Storytelling in the Composition Classroom*

Kathy Block

University of Manitoba

Increasingly, we understand and navigate the world via datafied ways of knowing. Online activities are transformed into big data, which is presented back to us in stories and arguments. In this process, data shapes our thinking. This is the starting point for Angela Laflen (2025) in her book *Critical Data Storytelling in the Composition Classroom* (Utah State University Press). Through our online activities, we are building a stock of “previously unimaginable quantities of data” (p. 187) that is tracked and analyzed, that is used to tell stories and build arguments, and that stokes AI. Laflen contends that the use of data, especially numerical data presented in visual formats, is a powerful form of multimodality and that the development of critical data literacy skills should be a priority for instructors in multimodal writing classes.

In *Critical Data Storytelling*, Laflen's concern, then, is not whether professors should allow students to use generative AI in the writing process (a frequent focus of discussion) but on the development of students' critical data literacy skills, given the ubiquity of data and datafied arguments. Her central point is that writing instructors should prioritize critical data literacy, creating a bridge between academic skills and the everyday skills students need to move critically through datafied environments. To support instructors who are beginning the journey, she provides sample writing assignments throughout the book and a chapter focused on assessment. For me (a writing instructor grounded in traditional academic literacies), Laflen's book provides a good stretch, showing how to centre the data literacy skills that instructors and students urgently need in a world permeated with mis- and disinformation.

Laflen describes why she began to include data literacy in her multimodal composition classes, a focus which she came to not because it was part of her training as a writing instructor but because she saw a gap. Her exploration started in her first-year and professional writing courses when she replaced one of the writing assignments with an infographic assignment. As she assessed her students' projects, she understood that her students did not have the range of data literacy skills required for the task. Laflen writes, "I was troubled by the ways that students' use of data could go wrong and undermine their arguments" (p. 5). Over time, she researched and developed an approach to teaching critical data literacy skills that includes three dimensions, which together facilitate students' abilities to read data critically and use data ethically:

- (1) **Functional literacy** – the technical skills and knowledge necessary to present data (e.g., creating different styles of charts and graphs),
- (2) **Critical literacy** – an orientation that involves asking questions about how data is collected and used, such that the student can accept or resist the data-based argument and the datafied information environment,
- (3) **Rhetorical literacy** – the understanding that when data is used, it is "invented" (p. 18), from its collection to its presentation and that data is used within rhetorical situations for persuasive and story-telling purposes.

Notably, Laflen emphasizes that working with students on critical data literacy skills does not require an instructor to have high-level statistics or mathematical skills. Rather, it requires a recognition that "a static approach to information" (p. 35) and the rigid design of writing assignments that limits students to traditional academic sources is not sufficient for an education that bridges to students' present and future. Depending on the experience of the instructor, working with students on critical data literacy may also require a willingness to co-learn with students.

In sum, Laflen makes a strong case for including data literacy in composition classes. A real strength of the book lies in her discussion of writing assignments where she demonstrates her pedagogy and scaffolds the process for instructors. Throughout the book, she includes sample reading and writing assignments from her first-year and professional

writing courses, shares her rationale for the assignments, sometimes suggests resources that can be used when implementing the assignment (including data sources and free tech tools for students), and provides samples of student work and student reflections.

Through the example assignments, I make connections to my own pedagogy and begin to think about where critical data literacy fits into courses I have taught. In her assignment design, I see echoes of John Bean's (2011) advice for assignment design, most especially his instruction to build a RAFT for students into the assignment instructions (i.e., clearly communicate the Role, Audience, Format, and Task for the assignment) (p. 98). Laflen also builds a RAFT into each set of assignment instructions. In addition, I see echoes of the Meaningful Writing Project (Eodice et al., 2016) that highlights the importance of *choice* for students with respect to the content of their work; in Laflen's assignments, the tasks are set but students often have scope to choose their content. Finally, in Laflen's assignments, I see echoes of the Council of Writing Program Administrator's (Anderson et al., 2015) work, that emphasizes the importance of interactive writing processes. Laflen incorporates peer review and self-reflection in the writing process and collaborates with her students to develop marking criteria. Because the design of her assignments is recognizable and builds on shared principles, focusing on critical data literacy feels achievable.

Convinced of Laflen's argument for including critical data literacy and seeing the connections in writing pedagogy, I begin to consider how critical data literacy could take a more prominent place in the writing courses I have taught and that I know. Building the focus on critical data literacy into multimodal composition classes is a good fit. In more traditional composition courses, analyzing data visualizations could be an excellent starting point for discussions of how "data are invented at every stage of the composition process" (Laflen, 2025, p. 18) and could increase awareness of rhetorical situation (i.e., the purposes and perceived audiences that drive the writing process). Starting with critical data literacy assignments that use information sources encountered in our everyday lives could help build a base and a bridge of understanding to more traditional academic literacies.

My only caution in implementing Laflen's suggestions is to Canadian readers, specifically the research processes suggested in Chapter 5, "Using Data as a Tool to Improve Teaching and Learning." Through my experience with formal assessment and participation at

international conferences, I have learned that some requirements for conducting research are different in Canada than they are in the United States, which is where Laflen lives and works. For example, processes for securing student permission to use their work and requirements for using old student data may be different. The required methods for storing student information may also be different. At the beginning of any assessment process, it is essential for instructors to check with their local Research Ethics Board and to learn about the requirements for assessment in their own location.

Overall, I highly recommend *Critical Data Storytelling* to all writing instructors for their consideration. I also recommend this book to instructors in other academic departments who are interested in working with students on the development of critical data literacy skills. Laflen's argument is solid and clearly presented, builds upon well-supported pedagogical practices, and makes an important contribution to the conversation about writing instruction in the age of generative AI. s

## References

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