

# Divided Germany, Divided Text

## Integrating Comics into the Beginning L2 Classroom

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Comics and graphic novels combine several features that make them a unique resource in the L2 classroom. Just like video footage, they are information-redundant, allowing the viewer to infer meaning from images in contexts where vocabulary and grammar are still developing. Yet unlike film, comics and graphic novels also have visual permanence. In other words, comics allow readers to determine the pace at which they take in information, providing added time to process and contextualize text in the second language. Because of these qualities, graphic novels have the potential to be particularly effective language learning tools when integrated properly into the classroom.

At the beginner level (i. e. with students who have only taken a foreign language for a semester or two) it is particularly difficult to find texts that are simultaneously interesting to undergraduate students, that represent authentic cultural products in the target language, and that are legible to students despite their limited skills in the foreign language. Yet, it is at the beginning stages of language learning where the benefits of the graphic novel's form can be most useful – after all, most children start out reading picture books, not James Joyce. For this reason, it is crucial to find a strategy for integrating comics and graphic novels into the beginning language classroom, rather than waiting until students are further along in the curriculum. Based on our experiences we would like to advocate for the use of what we are calling montage or short-segment-format graphic novels in the beginning L2 classroom. By selecting a graphic novel that, while having a cohesive overall theme, is itself divided into smaller, self-contained segments, we have had success teaching a graphic novel in our second semester German classes.

Our experimentation with graphic novels in the classroom was prompted by student feedback that the graded readers we were using in our first and second semester German classes at Duke University were boring and did not help the students to engage deeply with any of the grammar or cultural topics we were trying to cover. In an effort to motivate our students to be more engaged with the process of reading in a foreign language at the earliest stages of their learning, we turned to graphic novels. First, in one of his second semester German classes, Matt tried teaching an adapted version of Franz Kafka's *Die Verwand-*

lung. Although professors such as Lynn Marie Kutch<sup>1</sup> at Kutztown University have documented success teaching this text at the intermediate language level (Unterrichtspraxis, Spring 2014), the material ultimately proved too difficult for Matt's beginning language students. The students appreciated the authenticity of the text, but found many of the structures too challenging and some of the larger text boxes overwhelming at this stage of their language learning. Following the same complex story throughout the text was too difficult a task for them based on their current level of language skills. When we were then assigned to team teach second semester German in the Fall of 2014, we brainstormed how to correct for the difficulties Matt experienced and we concluded that we needed a text that contained more dialogue, rather than narrative prose, and that was broken down into smaller, more manageable segments. We eventually found exactly what we were looking for in Susanne Buddenberg and Thomas Henseler's *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt*,<sup>2</sup> a text that, thanks to our efforts, has now been fully incorporated into the second-semester language curriculum at Duke University as one of the highlights of the language sequence there.

This graphic novel tells the story of the Berlin Wall from the initial building of the wall in 1961 through the fall of the wall in 1989. All the stories it contains are based on real events, so it provided us with a rich and relevant cultural context upon which to frame our lessons. As we mentioned, the text is comprehensible even to beginning level students, in part because it is divided into five shorter, dialogue-heavy stories, each with a different protagonist. In addition, a few pages of historical background related to the events depicted follow each story. The narrative sections of the text generally refrain from using overly complicated grammatical structures, making them accessible to students after a little vocabulary building. The sections on historical background are in most cases too challenging for beginning students to read on their own, but we sometimes worked with specific paragraphs from these longer texts in class, where we glossed them for the students. At the very least, they offered students authentic images from the time period in question, helping them to contextualize the illustrations in the stories. They also opened up space to discuss the difference between drawings and photographs with the students, thereby focusing their attention on the benefits and limitations of the comics as a medium for communicating about historical events.

In order to blend the text into the course as seamlessly as possible we attempted to discuss *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt* with our students on the levels of vo-

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**1** | Lynn M. Kutch: From Visual Literacy to Literary Proficiency: An Instructional and Assessment Model for the Graphic Novel Version of Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*. In: Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German 47 (2014), No. 1, p. 56–68, online <https://online-library.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/tger.10156>.

**2** | Susanne Buddenberg/Thomas Henseler: *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt*. Zeitgeschichten [2012]. Berlin 2013.

cabulary, culture, and to a lesser extent, grammar. The most important part of this process involved providing students with a series of reading journals, which guided them through their reading assignments. These reading journals were modeled after the work of Elizabeth Bridges, who uses graphic novels in her intermediate language courses at Rhodes College, but we made some adjustments to accommodate the beginning language level of our students.<sup>3</sup> For example, we provided increased room for vocabulary building and put more emphasis on basic summarizing activities. With these handouts, we wanted students to engage with the text on three levels: vocabulary, reading comprehension, and critical thought. Each reading journal contains a few glossed vocabulary words to aid the students in their reading. In addition, students have the opportunity to develop reading skills that they can carry with them into more advanced language courses because the worksheet also provide them with space to record words that they looked up themselves. Students were taught about looking up and recording all the relevant linguistic information about a word (gender and plural form for nouns, past participle for verbs etc.), in an effort to integrate some of these words into their own vocabulary. We also made a concerted effort to start including some of the most relevant words in our grammar lessons so that the students received repetitive reinforcement of the words that were most important for their active vocabulary.

In order to promote reading comprehension and critical thinking, for each reading journal the students were also asked to perform two tasks, one of which required them to demonstrate a basic understanding of what happened in the text by summarizing the plot, and the second of which asked them to think critically about the text. For example, in the reading journal for pages 67–74 we asked students to answer a few plot questions about what happens to Detlef, the protagonist. After summarizing Detlef's actions, we asked the students to speculate about how Detlef feels at the end of the story in a panel in which they only get a visual depiction of his actions. Having the students intuit Detlef's emotional state ensured that they were thinking not just about the meaning of individual words in the text, but also about the story as a whole and its relationship to the historical context being evoked.

In an effort to embrace the format of the graphic novel itself, we tried to vary the medium in which the students expressed their understanding of the text in these assignments. For example, for the reading journal in a segment about the Familie Holzapfel, who escaped over the top of the wall using a zipline, we had the students draw the family's escape plans, labeling some of the components of their drawing. The vocabulary in this segment is the most difficult in the text

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**3** | Elizabeth Bridges: Bridging the Gap: A Literacy-Oriented Approach to Teaching the Graphic Novel *Der erste Frühling*. In: Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German 42 (2009), No. 2, p. 152–161, online <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1756-1221.2009.00049.x>.

and so we adjusted our expectations in terms of the kind of language we expected students to be able to produce when describing what was going on. Just as the images in a graphic novel transfer some of the weight of communication away from language, we encouraged our students to use this technique when the language exceeded their abilities to comprehend it. Techniques such as this can help students still get some linguistic and cultural knowledge out of engaging with a section of text that may be too difficult for them, without resorting to looking up every single word and spending all of their time buried in the dictionary.

In addition to the reading journals, we encouraged students to engage with the text and each other via social media by using their German class Twitter accounts. As a part of their homework, students were asked to tweet questions about the text for their classmates to answer. These tweeted questions ranged from vocabulary questions, to historical questions, to text-based questions about why the characters made certain choices. Tweeting about the text gave the students a forum to discuss issues that we did not have enough class time to address. In a situation like ours where the graphic novel is integrated into the curriculum without being integrated into the textbook, it is particularly important to have a platform, on social media or otherwise, for students to voice questions and topics for discussion outside of class time. When one of our colleagues taught the same graphic novel during the Spring 2015 semester, she neglected to emphasize the social media platform and found that students complained at the end of the course in their feedback about not having enough time in class to fully discuss the text. Adding this social media component also gives the students the opportunity to practice engaging with digital media in German, including the use of appropriate online abbreviations and even hashtags.

When we taught *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt* we had students read a short section of text (about seven–eight pages) for each class session over the course of several weeks. In hindsight, this may have contributed to the feeling that there was not enough time in class to discuss the text in as much depth as the students would have liked. By the time we had gone over the reading journal together, there was often very little time to expand on the questions asked there, before we had to transition into the grammar topic from the textbook for that day. The transition between working with the graphic novel and practicing the grammar topics from the textbook could be rather bumpy, and sometimes felt like a complete change of gears. Using the new vocabulary from the text in the grammar lessons helped with this, but there is room for improvement with regard to synchronizing grammar units with the content of the graphic novel. One way to potentially subvert this problem in the future would be to set aside one class period a week for the graphic novel, doing grammar from the textbook on the other days of the week. This more distinct division of time would better allow the instructor to highlight the reading skills and cultural background they are trying to develop by using the graphic novel, while still giving students the grammar education that they need to move forward in their language learning.

With a historically driven text such as *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt*, we felt that it was particularly important to do a thorough job of enhancing the students' reading of the material through both historical and genre-based contextualization. In order to do this, we took two class periods, one towards the beginning of our reading of the text and one about halfway through, and focused exclusively on cultural topics. In the first of these lessons, we gave students an overview of the history of the Berlin Wall. As mentioned earlier, we provided glossed and edited versions of the historical context sections from the book. Additionally, since it was the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Wall, we watched a short video in which Germans reflected on the Berlin Wall and its history.<sup>4</sup> Out of this video we highlighted the idea of the »Mauer im Kopf,« a term used to discuss the remaining biases and prejudices existing between former citizens of East and West Germany after unification. This concept was initially hard for the students to understand in German and we had to break into English briefly to allow the nuances of this idea to come through. However, we managed to generate enough of a discussion that after this lesson, students were prepared to think about the larger writing assignment that we gave them as a supplement to their reading of *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt*.

In addition to getting the students reading, we also used the comics format to get students writing in German. In order to tie together all that we had been doing and discussing in class, we asked our students to think about the idea of the »Mauer im Kopf« and to think about a time in their lives when they had encountered prejudice or hasty judgment. The students were then asked to create their own short comic telling one such story from their own lives. The student work from this assignment represents the greatest success that we had while teaching *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt*. Students described their experiences immigrating to the U.S. from a variety of cultural backgrounds and the prejudices they faced as they struggled to navigate the expression of their identity within American culture. Students wrote about moving away from strict religious backgrounds in which they were judged for their political opinions and sexual orientation. They wrote about the sexism and classism they encountered from their parents and/or their peers at Duke. Our students were clearly very motivated to think deeply about our class discussions when completing this assignment and the comic format helped students feel that they could say more than with words alone, telling detailed, and complex stories from their lives in a more nuanced way than their knowledge of German alone might have allowed. One of the biggest insights we gathered from teaching this material is that the same aspects of graphic novels that help students with their reading comprehension also encourage students to push the boundaries of their foreign language writing skills.

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4 | 25 Jahre Mauerfall. Uploaded by Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie (2 Sept. 2014), online [www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFFHCK8MacY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFFHCK8MacY).

Students were assisted in their ability to produce this wonderfully thoughtful graphic and linguistic work by the second of our two culture lessons. In this lesson we gave the students an overview of the history of comics and graphic novels in the US and in Europe. This lesson was taught in English, the only lesson that was taught outside of the target language in the entire course. In this lesson, we encouraged students to consider the history and importance of this genre. In addition, we got the students thinking the different ways graphic novel artists and authors think about the relationship between image and text. Therefore, in addition to the German historical context of *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt*, students were asked to think about the medium's broader influence on German and American political and literary culture. Although this lesson might initially seem like a bit of a detour, it helped the students to think critically about the different narrative strategies employed by the text. In teaching this lesson, we were able to expose our students to the importance of genre in reading, not only in a foreign language, but in any language.

In detailing our experiences teaching *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt* with second semester German students we hope to make the case for integrating graphic novels into the German language curriculum earlier and with greater frequency. Selecting an appropriate text for the level of the students is crucial, but there are texts available that beginning level students can handle with the appropriate guidance, *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt* serving as one such example. In summary, the montage or short-segment comic format of *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt* allows even beginning students to read an authentic text and encounter an important and relevant period in German history. The graphic novel/comics format gives students the opportunity to develop the kinds of reading strategies and vocabulary building skills that will help them as they move into intermediate level courses. By integrating this genre into the classroom, students are also encouraged to push the level of their expression in their written German. While pictures may make reading easier, they also force students to push the limits of their language composition skills so that they can effectively communicate what they are able to draw.

The difficulties to keep in mind when planning to use a text like *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt* in the L2 classroom primarily relate to the issue of timing, the timing of when students start reading the text within the semester and timing in terms of when within the class period or week the instructor discusses the graphic novel. Relatedly, the biggest challenge here is often integrating the graphic novel with grammar units, which may come from an independent textbook. Since the inception of the graphic novel unit into Duke's beginning German courses, these difficulties have been addressed by modifications to the syllabus and course structure during the planning phase of the teaching cycle. We at Duke have enjoyed teaching *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt* and we hope that the work shared here motivates other instructors to integrate similar texts into their own German language or other L2 curricula.

Since integrating *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt* into its beginner curriculum in 2014, the department of Germanic Languages and Literatures at Duke has also offered two advanced classes designed specifically around graphic novels, taught by Dr. Corinna Kahnke in 2015 and graduate student Matthew Hambro in 2016. From these courses it is clear that *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt* and the montage or short-story comics format are also well suited to advanced and intermediate courses, allowing for flexible choices when integrating authentic cultural materials across a spectrum of proficiency levels. Likewise, some of the strategies developed for these advanced classes are also of use when working with graphic novels at the beginner level.

For example, we have taken steps to increase the ability of students to interact with authentic source materials on all proficiency levels by collaborating with the Rubenstein and Bostock libraries at Duke. Introducing students to collections of historical political cartoons and shorter-form comics from 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany was an effective way to expand students' access to culturally authentic target language material. Engaging with graphic materials from special collections is an effective way to expand on the cultural lessons of the graphic novel by demonstrating the proximity that comics and political cartoon have to the historical themes being addressed in texts such as *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt*. Two authors to whom students respond particularly well are Wilhelm Busch and e.o. plauen. Many of the short-form comics and political cartoons from these authors, sometimes containing only a few words or a caption, are appropriate for the beginner level. In addition, special collections open up the opportunity for students in these classes to curate an exhibition of German comics. While such a project may not be possible in all circumstances, an online exhibit is an affordable and effective way to allow students to share their own comics or comics that they have found in a public format. Any opportunity for students to share their work and use German in an authentic context reinforces for students the power of the language they are in the process of acquiring and encourages them to think communicatively about potential audiences. As we hope to have demonstrated, graphic narratives are an effective way to open up these kinds of opportunities for students at all language levels from beginner to advanced.

## APPENDIX A: SAMPLE READING JOURNAL

Lesejournal – *Berlin – Geteilte Stadt*, S. 67-74

Neue Wörter	Englisch	Meine neuen Wörter	Englisch
das Abteil	Compartment		
die Grenzsicherungsanlage	border security facility		
beschlagnahmen	to confiscate		
der Ausreiseantrag	application for travel		

### Beim Lesen

**Verständnis** - Beantworten Sie die Fragen.

1. Warum muss Detlef zu Hause seine Abzüge machen?

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2. Wie hören die Ost-Berliner das Konzert?

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3. Warum wird Detlef freigelassen?

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**Meinung** – Was geht vielleicht durch Detlefs Kopf, als er am Ende der Geschichte über die Mauer in den Osten schaut? Welche Gefühle hat er vielleicht bei diesem Anblick?

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