




## Creating diverse and engaging world language communities with(out) textbooks

*Lucian Rothe*, University of Louisville—Kentucky 

*Jordan Gabbard*, University of Louisville—Kentucky

### Abstract

*Textbooks have been a staple in many world language (WL) programs for decades. But how do current higher education efforts to create more diverse, equitable, and inclusive learning spaces affect the use of commercial textbooks in WL classes? This report presents how a small German program at a large metropolitan university in the Southern United States redeveloped its program goals and materials to create engaging communities, address matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and adjust program practices based on constant evaluation. In doing so, it reflects on how textbooks have (not) been able to contribute to these objectives. Implications speak to curriculum development, instructional practices and policies, as well as student recruitment, and retention.*

**Keywords:** *textbook, curriculum redevelopment, diversity, German, small WL programs*

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### Introduction

The special report section of this SLRP issue piqued our interest, as it raised questions we have considered many times over the past two years. Do we still need commercial textbooks for our German classes? Which textbooks may work best for our students' and instructors' needs? How much do we want learners to spend on materials? How does the use of textbooks align with our program goals grounded in engaging communities, matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and constant program evaluation? This report presents how the textbooks we use contribute and fall short in supporting our program's objectives and what we do to complement them.

We share our insights from the perspective of a small German program that is part of a classical and modern languages department in the Southern United States. We are the only two full-time instructors; one is a White U.S. male serving as a senior lecturer and program coordinator, and the other is a White male German national who is an assistant professor working toward tenure. The program typically offers two sections each of first-, second-, and third-semester German per semester. At the intermediate level, we usually teach two courses over an academic year. Students can complete their German studies with a minor. Our university—a public institution with around 22,000 students—considers itself a community of care and aspires to become a “premier anti-racist metropolitan research university” (Kelso, 2020, para. 1). The German program's goals are inspired by the university's principles and efforts to promote social justice in world language (WL) education.

### On the Need to Create Diverse, Equitable, and Real-Life Language Communities

2020 marked a surge in the uprisings for social justice in the United States and around the globe (Fisher & Rouse, 2022; Press & Carothers, 2020). Activists' calls to reform institutions reached far and wide. Being situated in the city of Breonna Taylor—a 26-year-old African American who was unjustifiably fatally shot

in her apartment by police in March 2020—our institution met the moment with aspirations to stand against systemic racism and address DEI matters as a community of care (Heflin, 2021; Kelso, 2020). Such a community includes the care for oneself, for one another, and the community beyond the university (University of Louisville, n.d.). A community of care relies on its students' and faculty's support for each other, collective sensemaking, and inclusive pedagogy (Clemens & Robinson, 2021). Regular input and reflections on course design and pedagogical practices by both instructors and students play an important role in this process (Clemens & Robinson, 2021; Zhu et al., 2021). Consequently, university administrators have encouraged learners and educators to create a sense of belonging in courses and programs, redevelop curricula to reflect community members' diverse experiences, and critically review practices and infrastructures that prevent more equitable learning spaces, such as cost and accessibility of course materials.

In the field of WL education, the past years have seen an increasing number of WL teachers working towards more diverse, socially just, and inclusive instructional materials, teaching methods, program policies, and scholarship endeavors (Kishimoto, 2018; Kost et al., 2023; Kramsch, 2019; Motha, 2020). In German studies, past course materials and program advertisements, however, have often emphasized White speakers of the language, predominantly living in Germany—not representing the diverse lived experiences of all people in today's German-speaking areas (Bryant et al., 2019; Chavez, 2020; Ilett, 2009). It is therefore not surprising that college students' perceptions of German native speakers (NSs), learners, and teachers of the language are often stereotypical in nature (Chavez, 2021; Rothe, 2023b). Moreover, research has shown that many learners associate the idea of a German target language (TL) community primarily with White NSs who live in a different geographical location than the learners (Chavez, 2021; White, 2016). Understanding language communities as a population whose inhabitants are exclusively (White) NSs excludes local groups (learners and teachers) and People of Color living in German-speaking regions from group membership. German educators, therefore, need to develop learning spaces that engage diverse students in their communities locally and help them investigate the multifaceted experiences of TL members afar (Anya, 2020; Dörnyei, 2019b; Malakaj, 2020; Rothe, 2023c).

Rothe (2023c) and Piotti et al. (2022) recently demonstrated how German instructors can revise and supplement traditional course materials, such as textbooks, to deconstruct stereotypical notions about TL speakers and address matters of diversity and social justice. Rothe (2023c) described a semester-long project for novice learners. It included tasks to explore traces of Germanness in students' immediate environments and investigate the diversity of German speakers, for instance, by analyzing success stories of displaced persons that had moved to Berlin. Among other findings, students found it meaningful to learn about current and real-life topics, such as the refugee success stories, that were not covered by their textbook. Piotti et al. (2022) reformed their German intermediate-level language instruction via social justice pedagogy. The study's curricular example showed how their textbook seemed to portray superficial and stereotypical information about the city of Munich, "rife with beer, pretzels, BMWs, and happy people" (Piotti et al., 2022, p. 158). The authors supplemented these resources with additional instructional units to critically reflect on the book's presented topics from a social justice standpoint and how they related to students' lives.

Johnson (2022) and Westphal (2020) illustrated how language programs can decenter the classroom and promote outward orientation by engaging students in communities near and far. Johnson (2022) discussed a communities-centered WLs approach that emphasized the relationship between a language and its community. Consequently, the focus of language learning was beyond the classroom, that is, for students to "understand members of [TL] communities, express themselves in ways comprehensible to members of those communities, listen deeply to others' perspectives, and make new connections within those communities using the community language" (Johnson, 2022, p. 121). Johnson criticized commercially available textbooks that often include stereotypical cultural representations and lack in ethnic and linguistic diversity. Instead, she advocated for students' exposure to the TL's dynamic language varieties via various authentic resources featuring diverse community voices, stories, and linguistic practices. These resources may include literary texts or art projects by community members, information on current events, or products

of “ordinary people posting on social media” (Johnson, 2022, p. 124). Similarly, Westphal (2020) followed a communities-oriented approach when redeveloping her German program. She focused on building a sense of community and showing the “local relevancy” of German to learners (Westphal, 2020, p. 28). Instead of working on content presented in textbooks, many of her class sessions were community-engaged learning experiences, such as virtual meetings with study abroad students in German-speaking regions, trips to the German-American Chamber of Commerce, and an internship at a German hospital. Her approach to bridge local and global communities resulted in significant program growth over eight years.

Grounded in our university’s aspiration to be a community of care and WL education’s efforts to emphasize diversity, equity, and real-life relevance, we established the following three goals for our German program for 2021 and onward:

1. Equitable and engaging community: Members of the German program—faculty and students—create an equitable local TL community through engaging curricula that connect to all students’ daily lives and benefit real-life agendas.
2. Local and global diversity: Learners explore and critically reflect on the social, cultural, and linguistic pluralism of the TL regions and students’ local environments and perspectives through coursework and events.
3. Constant program evaluation: Students’ feedback and instructors’ experiences regularly inform instructional materials, classroom practices, and program policies.

We understand that our work is in the early stages and constantly in progress. We acknowledge that matters of diversity, inclusivity, and social justice require a sustained and ongoing commitment from us as language educators, including continuous self-reflection, an openness to unlearn and relearn our socialization in cultures dominated by inequities, and a willingness to collaborate and update teaching practices critically (Glynn et al., 2018; Kishimoto, 2018). We recognize that curricular adjustments and community building are only initial steps toward more equitable postsecondary education. The presented strategies in this article should therefore not be construed as simple solutions to larger systemic changes needed, for instance, regarding recruitment practices, graduate studies, professional development, and higher education funding models (Criser & Malakaj, 2020). Before proceeding to the description of how our textbooks do (not) contribute to the previously outlined objectives, it is paramount to situate this work in the context of our student population.

## Our Students

With an incoming fall 2021 class consisting of 31.3% first-generation college students and 38.9% Pell-eligible students, and with an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse student population (Table 1), it is critical that students’ evolving needs and expectations inform our textbook considerations.

**Table 1.** *Self-Identification of Students by Race/Ethnicity (University of Louisville, 2022)*

<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Students (Enrollment Fall 2021)</b>
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.06%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.13%
Race and Ethnicity Unknown	0.88%
Nonresident Alien/International	4.64%
Asian	5.62%
Hispanic or Latino	6.04%
Multiple Races	4.96%
Black	12.61%

White

65.06%

We also noticed an increase in full-time students who work full- or part-time for the largest courier company worldwide that have their North American hub adjacent to campus. The company offers tuition assistance to students who mostly work night shifts for them. Moreover, students take heavier course loads to graduate more quickly, and many have come to expect the flexibility provided by hybrid or non-traditional methods of instruction. As a result, our incoming students are more likely to have a broader range of responsibilities and expectations of a course. They are engaged in learning but are periodically overwhelmed, need more flexibility in how and when they complete their coursework, and benefit from multiple pedagogical approaches.

We therefore find it efficacious to offer our students robust but flexible curricula, which challenge and encourage them, but seek to allow students alternate paths to success if they have prolonged absences. The accessibility and plentiful content available to students in our chosen textbooks is helpful in this effort, even if they bring disadvantages as well.

### Advantages and Disadvantages of Our Textbooks

We use three textbooks across our beginning- and intermediate-level German courses: *Impuls Deutsch I* (Tracksdorf et al., 2019), *Deutsch im Blick* (Abrams et al., 2017), and *Stationen* (Augustyn & Euba, 2020).

*Impuls Deutsch I* is a beginning-level textbook aimed at U.S. college students. The textbook utilizes an interdisciplinary and intercultural flipped classroom approach to build students’ linguistic and intercultural competencies. We use this textbook in our first- and second-semester courses, completing three to four chapters during each 16-week semester. *Deutsch im Blick* is a beginning-level textbook for U.S. college learners. It is a free, open source, multimedia textbook, which introduces grammar and vocabulary in the context of a broad range of cultural and historical topics. We use this textbook in our third-semester course, completing the final four chapters during the 16-week semester. *Stationen* is an intermediate-level textbook aimed at U.S. college learners. The chapters highlight cultural, societal, and historical aspects, as well as linguistic features of 11 cities in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, and of Germans living abroad. We use this textbook in our fourth- to sixth-semester courses, completing four chapters each during a 16-week semester.

Based on textbook reviews (Maxey, 2021; O’Brien, 2010; Piotti et al., 2022; Rothe, 2021) and personal experience, we summarized each textbook’s advantages and disadvantages as they relate to our program goals (Tables 2, 3, and 4).

Table 2. *Advantages and Disadvantages of Impuls Deutsch I with Respect to Program Goals*

Program Goals	Pros	Cons
Equitable and engaging community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>abundant information about diverse TL communities interwoven into thematic lessons</li> <li>plentiful review and practice activities available online</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the more interdisciplinary activities can outpace some students’ mathematical and scientific knowledge/skills</li> <li>purchasing, accessing, and navigating all parts of the textbook can be challenging</li> <li>overall cost of around \$90 for a 12-months subscription</li> </ul>

2	Local and global diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>provides content from diverse NSs and language learners in German-speaking world</li> <li>features a wide range of cultures and disciplines throughout</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>N/A</li> </ul>
3	Consistent feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>gives students frequent opportunities to check on their learning process</li> <li>immediate feedback provided on most homework assignments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>some automatically-graded assignments can be frustrating and discouraging for students due to narrow focus of what constitutes a correct answer</li> <li>does not integrate with learning management system (LMS) (Blackboard)</li> </ul>

**Table 3.** *Advantages and Disadvantages of Deutsch im Blick with Respect to Program Goals*

	<b>Program Goals</b>	<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
1	Equitable and engaging community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>topics are introduced in the context of authentic TL settings</li> <li>free and easy to access/implement in in-person and online courses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>navigating the different parts of the textbook/website can be challenging at first</li> <li>some references to TL websites and cultural phenomena need updating</li> </ul>
2	Local and global diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>covers several distinct dialects, including those spoken in the US</li> <li>includes interviews with NSs, language learners, and other authentic materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>cultural content is not the most current and benefits from up-to-date supplementation</li> <li>lacks DEI focus</li> </ul>
3	Consistent feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>all parts of the textbook are available online making it easy to include, omit, and supplement sections as needed</li> <li>grammar activities provide immediate feedback to students' input</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>activities outside of the textbook's grammar component do not provide immediate feedback</li> <li>not much reflection on learning process</li> <li>does not integrate with LMS (Blackboard)</li> </ul>

**Table 4.** *Advantages and Disadvantages of Stationen with Respect to Program Goals*

<b>Program Goals</b>	<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
1 Equitable and engaging community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cultural information about TL communities linked well to review and practice of language skills</li> <li>• simple accessibility of materials via online platform MindTap</li> <li>• free trial period at the beginning of semester</li> <li>• overall cost of around \$127 for a 24-months subscription</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of engaging activities that ask students to do something with the information they receive from the book, e.g., making meaningful connections to local communities, current events, and students' daily lives</li> <li>• overall cost of around \$97 for one semester</li> </ul>
2 Local and global diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• linguistic diversity</li> <li>• focus on urban centers in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of critical reflections of topics from a social justice standpoint</li> <li>• lack of individuals from diverse backgrounds</li> </ul>
3 Consistent feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• flexible order of chapters/flexible usage across multiple courses</li> <li>• ample entry points to supplement materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• little to no built-in feedback loops and reflections on learning</li> </ul>

The main benefits in using these textbooks for our courses are that they provide a common structure across multiple course sections and modalities, maintain clear continuity between sequential courses, deliver plentiful content for students to develop their language skills during and outside of class time, and connect our program to a broader network of instructors and learners using the same textbooks.

However, these textbooks also present major shortcomings when it comes to meeting our program's objectives. Specifically, they present a potential barrier to students in terms of cost and access. They can be frustrating to navigate and utilize. They can be challenging to integrate with our LMS. They could focus more on diverse and inclusive views of TL communities, and their content is not entirely up-to-date or relevant to our current students. The next section describes our program practices to account for these shortcomings.

### **Our Strategies Beyond Textbooks**

As demonstrated previously, our textbooks provide a useful curricular base. Nevertheless, they are unable to fully meet our three program objectives:

- equitable and engaging community,
- local and global diversity, and
- constant program evaluation.

We therefore adjusted our textbook utilization and supplemented them with the following resources and practices.

**Objective one:** Prior research (Dörnyei, 2019a; Johnson, 2022; Westphal, 2020) underscored that engaging learning experiences connect students, reflect their daily lives, and benefit their real-life agendas. We therefore reduced our textbook use per semester and complemented our classes with a variety of cross-curricular events for learners of all proficiency levels, such as company tours, museum visits, and invitations of guest speakers. To address learners' desires to see how language learning contributes to future career opportunities (Murphy et al., 2022), for example, we established a relationship with a local manufacturer from Germany. Every semester they invite students to their headquarters to discuss the benefits of learning German, receive information about employment opportunities, and go on a tour of the company's office premises. Starting in fall 2023, learners will also be able to enroll in a community internship course that allows them to intern at that company while improving their language skills and receiving college credit.

Furthermore, we organize multiple 60-minute question-and-answer (Q&A) events on campus for our students. At these sessions, guest speakers from the study abroad office, other departments, and the community provide information on study and internship abroad opportunities or the differences in living and learning between the United States and German-speaking countries. These events are often scheduled during course times and can mostly be attended virtually, if desired by students. They are partially in German and English, and learners receive level-appropriate tasks to account for different proficiency levels. To build a larger sense of community between faculty and students, we revitalized the German Club of our program to organize and promote cross-curricular events together. Club members get to know students from other German courses, participate in the development of events, and can add these experiences to their resumé or *curricula vitae*.

Offering cross-curricular events to learners also resulted in lower textbook expenses, as we were able to use the required textbooks over more courses and supplement our instruction with free materials. An average U.S. textbook costs about \$105 per course (Hanson, 2022). At the introductory level, our students spend around \$30 for coursebooks per semester, and about \$43 per semester for three intermediate-level courses required to receive a minor.

**Objective two:** Previous scholarship has emphasized the need to address the social, cultural, and linguistic pluralism of the TL regions and students' local environments (Criser & Knott, 2019; Ilett, 2009; Rothe, 2022; Rothe et al., 2023). Given our textbooks' shortcomings in these areas, we complemented the curriculum with semester-long projects and invitations of diverse guests from German-speaking regions. The semester-long projects are based on versions of Rothe's (2023c) engaging tasks for language learners to explore connections with the TL locally and broaden students' understanding of language-community membership beyond stereotypical notions of NSs. Students in all courses complete about five (virtual and in-person) tasks per semester and report their responses and reflections in an ePortfolio. Assignments include, among other, explorations of Germanness in students' immediate environments, an investigation of linguistic differences between Germany and Austria, an analysis of success stories by displaced people who moved to Berlin, reflections on virtual lectures about Germany and the Black diaspora, and a virtual Q&A on political activism by People of Color in East Germany.

Furthermore, some tasks are related to visits of diverse German-speaking guests. Once a year, we secure funding to promote speakers from historically underrepresented groups in German studies. Previously, we welcomed Nigerian-German filmmaker and actress Sheri Hagen, Black German author Katharina Warda, and Burkinabe-German musician and activist Ezé Wendtoin. These guests offer, for example, workshops for all German learners, public Q&As, or concerts to present and discuss their work, language experiences, and topics such as diversity, racism, and xenophobia in today's German-speaking areas.

**Objective three:** A key aspect of a community of care is learners' and instructors' regular input and reflections on and resulting adjustments to course design and pedagogical practices (Clemens & Robinson,

2021; Malakaj, 2020; Zhu et al., 2021). To continuously evaluate and improve program quality, we implemented a systematic collection of data. In all courses, we administer student background/interest surveys, brief mid-semester and end-of-semester feedback questionnaires. In the feedback surveys, we invite students to share what contributed and hindered their learning up to that point in the semester, how they would improve the course, and describe their experience with equity, diversity, and inclusion in the course. Additionally, we ask every learner to meet with their instructor at least once a semester during office hours, or as we call them ‘student hours,’ putting the emphasis on our learners (Schicker, 2021). These 15-minute (in-person or virtual) meetings with individual students contribute to seeing the whole student (Malakaj, 2020). We talk about how their semester is going and how they are doing, what their concerns about the course and other matters may be, connect them with university resources if necessary, and ask them how they envision their German learning experience in the near and distant future. Additionally, we have bi-weekly faculty meetings and monthly meetings with the officers of the German Club to discuss current and future courses and events.

At the end of each semester, we review the gathered feedback from students about their course experiences and compare it with our teaching experiences, as well as recent scholarship on best practices in language pedagogy and insights we gained at professional development opportunities (Malakaj, 2020; Van der Sluis, 2020; Westphal, 2020). Ultimately, these review sessions inform general and course-specific adjustments for the next semester. As a result of these discussions, we have redeveloped our curricula in the past by, for instance, adjusting the pacing of courses and adding additional review and catch-up days, providing more cross-curricular events based on students’ interests, and implementing language learning through virtual reality (VR) tools at the university’s teaching and learning center. Furthermore, we started experimenting with a new type of assignment and attendance policy that follows a *choose your own adventure* approach by providing a plethora of assignment opportunities throughout the semester (Loveless-Hall, 2021). It allows students to control how they demonstrate skills based on their respective needs and goals. Finally, we provided more flexibility in the course sequence at the intermediate level to make it easier for learners to take German courses every semester, and ultimately, receive a German minor and graduate on time.

## Challenges and Advice

Despite our satisfaction with the implemented changes described above, we admit that this process has not been without significant challenges. The first challenge we faced was the sense of feeling overwhelmed. When we started this process, we considered many aspects we wanted to investigate and change—sooner rather than later. Additionally, through feedback collected in our courses, we gathered lots of data that required analysis. Logically, it all felt overwhelming, and we had to remind ourselves of the following advice from colleagues:

1. Redesign your program step by step and give yourself time, multiple semesters, or even years (Berg & Seeber, 2017; Van der Sluis, 2020).
2. Create a plan of what you want to investigate and set multiple SMARTER—specific, measurable, assignable, realistic, time-related, evaluated, and reviewed—goals (Yemm, 2013).

The second challenge is time investment. Meeting with publishers, attending professional developments, reviewing WL scholarship, revising instructional materials and curricula, meeting with students, or connecting with local companies takes time. A lot of time. We recognize that teachers operate in systems where training and curricular advancements are often uncompensated and must be done on extra time. We, therefore, encourage educators interested in pursuing this work to be mindful of their capacities and health (mental and physical) (Caspari, 2023; Denzel & Ostrau, 2023); if at all possible, work as a team, including students, and share tasks; and communicate curricular development efforts to department chairs and/or institutional superiors. Perhaps, efforts can be incentivized through additional compensation, adjustments to work plans, or other types of acknowledgments.



## Conclusion

We began this report by posing four introductory questions we answer briefly before providing insights into observed successes and concluding with descriptions of the next steps.

*Question 1: Do we still need commercial textbooks for our German classes?* We determined that the commercial textbooks we use benefit our students and us as instructors for various reasons. *Question 2: Which textbooks may work best for our students' and instructors' needs?* *Impuls Deutsch I, Deutsch im Blick,* and *Stationen* currently provide a practical curricular base for our courses. *Question 3: How much do we want learners to spend on materials?* We aim to keep the cost of materials at around \$30 per semester. Ideally, we will reduce these expenses in the future. *Question 4: How does the use of textbooks align with our program goals?* Our textbooks—despite their benefits—do not fully satisfy our program goals. We, therefore, supplement them with various materials, such as semester-long projects or VR units, offer cross-curricular events, invite guest speakers, and keep the whole student in mind when adjusting program practices and policies.

While being a work in progress, we have seen the first successes of our program redevelopment. We remind readers that these success stories should be viewed as a heuristic device reflecting program improvement. In other words, unfortunately, we cannot link exactly which of our specific actions led to the respective outcomes described next.

Learners' mid-semester and end-of-semester feedback indicates that students do not mind that their courses rely less and less on textbooks. On the contrary, they enjoy trying out new language learning technologies, such as VR scenarios, and participating in events beyond the classroom, like taking a trip to a local German company or visits by diverse German-speaking guests. Attendance at these events has been high over the past two years. Moreover, the German Club has established an engaged member base of 54 students since 2021. Despite declining enrollments across the university's language programs, we have also seen a small but steady increase in enrollments in German courses beyond the introductory levels and in students seeking a minor. These positive developments hint at students' enjoyment of being German-speaking community members and motivate us to continue pursuing our program objectives.

The next steps in our work include continuing to listen to student feedback and observing learners' behaviors in our courses and program. We recognize that we live in challenging times, which is why we should all be mindful of our well-being. Ideally, we create professional and educational spaces that support all instructors and learners (Brunow & Kuhn-Brown, 2023; Denzel & Ostrau, 2023; Rothe, 2023a). Regarding instructional materials, we will explore further the capabilities of the VR technology we recently introduced in our courses. We will study learners' long-term engagement and learning outcomes with respect to immersive experiences and interactions in German-speaking cities, regions, and locations. Thanks to a collaboration with the teaching and learning center on campus—which provides the VR technology and expertise for free—we have all our students travel abroad, albeit virtually. Finally, we will keep investigating options to minimize costs for our learners, regardless of whether they are pursuing a language requirement or German minor. Ultimately, we will remain open to learning about new, innovative instructional resources and questioning the use of commercial textbooks.

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## About the Authors

**Lucian Rothe** (PhD, University of Wisconsin—Madison) is an Assistant Professor of German in the Department of Classical and Modern Languages at the University of Louisville. His research explores perceptions of language communities. He has taught in Germany and the United States and has worked as a mentor for world language educators.

**E-mail:** [Lucian.Rothe@louisville.edu](mailto:Lucian.Rothe@louisville.edu)

**Jordan Gabbard** (MA, University of Kentucky) is a Senior Instructor of German in the Department of Classical and Modern Languages at the University of Louisville. His teaching focuses primarily on beginning-level German language and culture courses. He serves as Language Program Coordinator and organizes study abroad exchanges to German-speaking countries.

**E-mail:** [Jordan.Gabbard@louisville.edu](mailto:Jordan.Gabbard@louisville.edu)