

Wolfgang Butzkamm

Discovering myself: A questionnaire for advanced classes

Notes for the Teacher

Objectives

- to give students an opportunity to learn more about themselves
- to afford practice in writing

Topic

„Erkenne dich selbst - know thyself - get to know yourself“ is a famous maxim attributed to Socrates. Gertrude Moskowitz once wrote:“The popularity of horoscopes and handwriting analysis attest to the desire to find out more about the complexities that make us the unique individuals we are.“ In this exercise we do not leave it to others to tell us who we are. We will make our own effort at gaining insights into ourselves by answering a number of personal questions. The questions have been adapted from questionnaires used in magazines to interview famous people. It is important to tell the students that they need not take the questions seriously. Evasive answers, funny comments or downright lies will also be acceptable. On the other hand, most of the questions are well worth an honest effort.

Suggested Treatment

Step 1.

Pass copies of worksheet 1 to everyone. Introduce the activity along the following lines:

There are lots of things about ourselves that we are not aware of. For instance, have you ever thought of when you are happiest or what would be the worst thing for you to happen or what your favourite animal is? On your sheet you will find a great number of similar questions that you may answer as you think fit. Try to be honest most of the time because this is an opportunity for you to think about yourself. If you can't think of anything to say go on to the next question or give reasons why you can't or don't want to give an answer. And if you can come up with funny answers they would be most welcome. If you can say a lot on one particular problem, then feel free to write a lot and leave out other items on the list instead.“

You can orient the class by reading out a few questions plus the answers given in the *solutions 1a*. Or you can have them look through the questionnaire from *The Guardian* (slightly different questions) and the answers given by the famous language teaching expert Dr. h.c. Rudolf Nissen (*solutions 1b*)

Step 2

The students start writing, and the teacher helps out with words and expressions when necessary. Both bilingual and monolingual dictionaries should also be available for students to consult on their own.

Five to ten minutes before the end of the lesson students should be told to stop writing and re-read what they have written, making corrections to ensure both clarity of expression and factual and grammatical accuracy. Time for re-thinking, re-writing, revising, editing.

Step 3

Before the next lesson, go through the answers carefully, noting all the interesting points that might spark off a discussion among the students. You will particularly take note of the many things students in the class have in common - perhaps without knowing it. Select interesting answers and ask the authors to read them out to the class.

Homework

Ask your students to think up a few more questions that could reveal something about themselves. Here are a few:

What is your favourite season and why?

Have you ever been proud (ashamed) of yourself and why?

How do you relax? What do you do to relax?

Are there ideas or events that you would like to suppress, put out of your mind?

What have been your best holidays so far?

Distribute the passage from E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (worksheet 2) and tell the students to translate it into German.

Worksheet 1

1. What is perfect earthly happiness for you? What is your dream of happiness?
2. What is the greatest unhappiness for you?
3. What would be for you the worst thing that could happen? What do you consider the greatest misfortune?
4. Where would you like to live?
5. What faults do you excuse the most? / What faults are you most likely to pardon?
6. Who are your favourite heroes from a novel or film / in fiction?
7. Who are your favourite heroines in fiction?
8. Who is your favourite personality in history?
9. Who are your heroines in history?
10. Who are your heroines in real life?
11. Who are your heroes in real life?
12. Who is your favourite painter / artist?
13. Who is your favourite composer?
14. What is your favourite colour?
15. Who is your favourite author?
16. Who is your favourite poet?
17. What is your favourite flower?
18. What is your favourite bird?
19. What characteristic or skill do you value the most / rate highly in a man? /
20. What characteristic or skill do you value most / rate highly in a woman?
21. What is your favourite virtue?
22. What is your favourite activity / occupation?
23. Who, or what, would you like to have been? Who or what would you have liked to be?
24. What is your main characteristic? Your character's main trait?
25. What are your big faults? What is your biggest fault?
26. What do you rate highly in your friends?
27. On which occasions do you sometimes lie?
28. Do you ever buy yourself something extravagant? What would that be?
29. What keeps you from sleeping at night?
30. Is there any building which impressed you more than any other one?
31. As what kind of a person would you like to be remembered after your death?
32. Can you think of a personal motto?

Worksheet 2

E.M. Forster: Aspects of the Novel

(New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company 1954)

We cannot understand each other, except in a rough and ready way; we cannot reveal ourselves, even when we want to; what we call intimacy is only a makeshift; perfect knowledge is an illusion. But in the novel we can know people perfectly, and, apart from the general pleasure of reading, we can find here a compensation for their dimness in life. In this direction fiction is truer than history, because it goes beyond the evidence, and each of us knows from his own experience that there is something beyond the evidence, and even if the novelist has not got it correctly, well - he has tried. He can post his people in as babies, he can cause them to go on without sleep or food, he can make them to be in love, love and nothing but love, provided he seems to know everything about them, provided they are his creations. That is why *Moll Flanders* cannot be here, that is one of the reasons why *Amelia* and *Emma* cannot be here. They are people whose secret lives are visible or might be visible: we are people whose secret lives are invisible. And that is why novels, even when they are about wicked people, can solace us; they suggest a more comprehensible and thus a more manageable human race, they give us the illusion of perspicacity and of power. (p.63-64)

Vocabulary notes:

makeshift	something used in the case of a sudden need, because there is nothing better
dimness	the state of being unclear, without contours
Moll Flanders	a novel by <i>Daniel Defoe</i> (1661-1731), published in 1721. The story tells of Moll's marriages & liaisons & her visits to Virginia, where she finds her mother & discovers that she has unwittingly married her own brother. Back in England, she becomes a pickpocket, is detected and transported to Virginia. There she and one of her former husbands set up as planters on a plantation she inherited from her mother.
Emma	<i>Amelia</i> : a novel by <i>Henry Fielding</i> (1707-1754), published in 1751; the story of penniless William Booth who runs away with the virtuous Amelia. The novel deals with the misfortunes of the young couple. a novel by <i>Jane Austen</i> (1775-1817), published in 1816. This story is mainly occupied with clever, young Emma's attempts at match-making. Whilst trying to find a husband for her protégé Harriet Smith, she causes chaos all over the place, but in the end both Harriet and Emma end up with suitable husbands.
wicked	extremely bad, morally wrong
to solace s.o.	to comfort s.o. when s/he's unhappy
perspicacity	the ability to show clever judgement and understanding

Solutions 1a

(Various answers from British students of German)

1. What is perfect earthly happiness for you? What is your dream of happiness?

Being together with someone I love and who loves me, and laughing together.

Happy, healthy, successful in life (not necessarily with money), surrounded by loved ones.

The most important thing is that I am happy and that I marry someone whom I really love and who makes me happy. I would also like to live a long and healthy life.

To be with loved ones, with no major worries, problems or concerns, with no time limits and the possibility for everyone just to enjoy life to its full. Money doesn't really come into the equation, as long as you've got enough to survive without worrying where the next meal is coming from, and if you've got your health, then everyone should appreciate each other and spend valuable time with loved ones, doing the simple things in life, e.g. having a picnic on the beach, going for a walk in the country, hand in hand. That for me, is true happiness.

A realistic dream: to feel happy in myself no matter what the circumstances. To be able to accept the things I cannot change and to have the courage to change the things I can, and above all to have the wisdom to know the difference. I also believe that true happiness occurs when we have found the solution to expressing ourselves in a way that we are being true to ourselves, without fear or hatred as motives. I would like to own and renovate an old farmhouse, have lots of children around, be busy all the time, have lots of friends, and have a very fulfilling job as a teacher. I would like to spend most of my lessons working on plays which we would stage during the school year and would be a great success.

2. What is the greatest unhappiness for you?

The thing that would make me most unhappy would be to see a loved one of mine in pain and suffering for which nothing could be done. Many would say that a death of a loved one is worse, but I do not agree. That would, of course, be a terrible tragedy. Watching a loved one in pain with no relief would be my worst nightmare come true.

I would not like to be lonely or unhappy. I would not like to be a victim of a miscarriage of justice. One of the most unfortunate things that can happen to me is to fail an exam which I have spent a long time preparing for. That would make me quite unhappy.

3. What would be for you the worst thing that could happen? What do you consider the greatest misfortune?

If my 5-year-old son died. If I lost my sight or sense of hearing.

4. Where would you like to live?

I would like to live in the countryside, far away from car fumes and noise. It would also be nice to live somewhere where the sun mostly shines.

I would like to live in a peaceful world, where my children could grow up safe and happy. I have no particular town or country in mind, wherever I end up, I would try and make it into a personal, safe environment away from danger. I would like to live quite near to my family though, so that a family bond is strongly attached.

I would like to live in an unspoilt part of the English countryside, particularly because it is rich in natural wildlife. It would be nice if there was a river nearby so that I could enjoy my passion for boating.

5. What faults do you excuse the most? / What faults are you most likely to pardon?

If someone is late and has a good excuse.

Innocent, genuine mistakes, where the person concerned really didn't mean to make the error in the first place. If the fault was committed unknowingly, then you should excuse the person.

I am always apologising for being late for someone or something. I also find myself being unnecessarily rude to people and thus having to apologise.

6. Who are your favourite heroes from a novel or film / in fiction?

I like the lonely, often eccentric anti-hero, who does not seem to fit in, yet has the courage to express his feelings of anger or pain and wants to change the world, even if he knows he is powerless, eg. Goethe's *Werther* or Hermann Hesse's characters like *Siddharta* or *Steppenwolf*.

I haven't got a favourite hero from a novel, but if I did have, it would have to be someone like Richard Gere in *An Officer and a Gentleman*, the film where he is just the type of man all women love!

My favourite hero is Joseph K. from Kafka's novels. He is an exciting character and is very well known amongst intellectuals.

7. Who are your favourite heroines in fiction?

The ones who hold their head up high and defy society with their revolutionary ideas or behaviour. I like the powerful Gretel in the fairy-tale who tricks the witch into sticking her head inside the oven, pushes her in, and then runs off with the loot!

8. Who is your favourite personality in history?

Jesus Christ who healed people with his soothing words.

Probably Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc) as at such a young age, she knew exactly what she wanted and just how she was going to get it. She was not frightened of anyone or anything. Another favourite would be Florence Nightingale, who dedicated her whole life to helping others, less fortunate than herself.

Firstly it would have to be Winston Churchill, because he saved England from Nazi occupation. The comes King Henry the Eighth of England and thirdly Admiral Horatio Nelson.

9. Who are your heroines in history?

There were so many famous women who developed science and education and played an important part in forming new ideas and thoughts which furthered our civilisation. Traditionally, a hero is someone who overcomes obstacles, saves someone and often takes risks in doing so. I think the people who risked their lives during the Second World War in order to save the lives of Jews, are heroes and heroines.

10. Who are your heroines in real life?

Politicians who stand up for what they believe in, often having to deal with male recalcitrance and criticism. Otherwise mothers are real heroines when they exert patience and lovingness towards their children.

Any female that beats a man at his own game, fairly and squarely. Apart from that, I don't really have any heroes and heroines - I think that everyone of us will do something heroic at some time in our life, e.g. help in an accident, face an illness etc., but it is only the famous and wealthy people that normally get recognised for doing something heroic, so in my mind, every single one of us is a hero or a heroine and I don't want to look up in awe to just one individual. Every person also has their faults, so I would not brand someone as a complete „hero“ or „heroine“.

Margaret Thatcher (for saving the conservatism of England), the Queen, my mother and my girlfriend.

11. Who are your heroes in real life?

I think everyone is a hero or can be a hero. Life and fitting in with the requirements of our society in 1997 is a tough job, and mastering it is heroic. I consider a lot of people to be heroes, or rather, deserve a lot of respect, in their own right, e.g. doctors, nurses, scientists looking for new cures for diseases, children coping with life-threatening illnesses etc.

My grandfather; Winston Churchill; my father. And many other people who have achieved considerable respect from others.

12. Who is your favourite painter / artist?

I like the colours used by Breughel, the Flemish painter of the 16th century, and the large scenes he painted, depicting the whole feeling of the times, similar to what Dickens could do in his books. Otherwise I like colour paintings and paintings or drawings of parts of the body, eg. Dürer's praying hands.

Any of the impressionist painters, or perhaps Van Gogh, for his „sunflowers“ painting.

My favourite painters are firstly John Constable (for his true and magnificent portrayal of England), secondly Paul Gauguin (paintings are very colourful), thirdly Picasso (because he developed a new form of modern art).

13. Who is your favourite composer?

I like romantic piano music most of all, eg. Chopin's waltzes. Verdi and Mozart are also fantastic at conveying so much feeling in a piece of music. Verdi's „Requiem“ is a masterpiece.

I have never really appreciated classical music, so I couldn't do any justice to this answer.

Georg Friedrich Händel, because of his trumpet concertos. Secondly, Andrew Lloyd Webber, for composing many of the world's most famous musicals. Thirdly, Chopin, because of his sentimental piano pieces.

14. What is your favourite colour?

It depends on my mood. I like bright colours, natural colours like beige and shades of brown. I do not like artificial and loud colours. Recently I have begun to like pale purple combined with dark purple.

15. Who is your favourite author?

I have always held D.H. Lawrence in high esteem for his ability to describe nature as a mirror of human emotions. I admire all authors who manage to put pen to paper, even in the most hostile conditions, simply because of the urge to communicate the reality they are experiencing. In this respect, let me mention First World War poets, such as Winfred Owen or Siegfried Sasson who wrote about the atrocities they experienced.

16. Who is your favourite poet?

All poetry can be beautiful. It is hard to name one poet. Each poem has its own intention and the effect it has on the readers can vary enormously. There are poems that you can never forget, and there are others which are so light and funny that you would never want to miss them. Again, I don't know of enough poets to do any justice to one of them.

Rainer Maria Rilke. I got to know him as a part of my degree course which I am studying in London.

17. What is your favourite flower?

All flowers that smell nice, especially yellow flowers. Roses and daffodils are my favourites.

Red roses from a boyfriend. However, a bunch of hand-picked wildflowers would possibly mean more, as the red roses are so thoughtless and stereotyped nowadays.

Lilies, tulips, roses, poppies and the hibiscus plant. Anything that smells nice.

18. What is your favourite bird?

I think magpies are beautiful, because their markings are so distinct, you always recognise them. I also enjoy the fact that they are attracted to shiny objects.

A robin. His little red breast always means that Christmas is coming for me. I never see them at any other time of the year, so the robin is synonymous with Christmas, family and rejoicing for me.

Any bird which tastes nice when cooked, i.e. pheasant, wild duck, goose, wood pigeon, partridge, peacock, guinea fowl.

19. What characteristic or skill do you value the most / rate highly in a man? /

Being able to express his feelings, or at least to show them honestly.

Honesty. If somebody is honest, then you know exactly where you stand with them and then any problems you will hear about as they will voluntarily tell you. You never then have to wonder what is going on behind your back, if somebody is honest, then it is a lot easier to trust them. Then, gentleness and understanding.

His honesty, their ability to work hard and to take on a lot of stress. Man's braveness and never-ending desire to conquer the impossible.

20. What characteristic or skill do you value most / rate highly in a woman?

Being firm and not backing down in an attempt to please. I also rate kindness and the ability to really care very highly.

I would still say the same thing - honesty.

Her ability to look after and bring up young children. Her ability to do the same things that a man can do despite being physically inferior to him.

21. What is your favourite virtue?

Honesty - saying what you mean or believe or feel. Also cheerfulness and the talent to look on the bright side.

Again honesty, gentleness and understanding. Honesty is something that not everyone has, so I respect those who do. I would also consider „to love someone genuinely“ as a virtue, it is something that you have to work at.

My ability to work hard and to stand up for something that I know is right. My most successful virtue is to be able to satisfy other people and to make them happy.

22. What is your favourite activity / occupation?

I like swimming and dancing. I enjoy being with children and telling stories. As a profession, I would choose acting on stage or running a drama group as a very fulfilling pastime.

Spending some free, unpressurized time with my loved ones, whilst having some nice food and drink and catching up on all of the news, whilst laughing and smiling constantly.

I love to travel to unusual places and to do things other people could never hope to do. I like to eat unusual food in expensive restaurants.

23. Who, or what, would you like to have been? Who or what would you have liked to be?

It is impossible to answer this question, because I do not know what it would have been like to be someone else. However if I had had the talent I would have liked to have been in a position of authority as a politician or an author who has the power to impress people's minds and change their thoughts. I would also have liked to have been a pianist or an opera singer.

I am very happy being myself, perhaps I was chosen to be me and in the future I will do something important that I wouldn't have done, if I wasn't me!!!

I would like to become an explorer. More realistically I would like to become someone big and important in the world of business.

24. What is your main characteristic? Your character's main trait?

I'm generally very outspoken if I feel strong about something. I can appear a bit bossy but that might just be because I like to get things done and do not like beating around the bush.

Rationality and honesty. The ability to let whatever others say in haste, just go straight over my head. I would also say that I am open, chatty and friendly.

I am a very caring person and hard-working. I am a positive person and like helping others.

25. What are your big faults? What is your biggest fault?

I make judgements about people very quickly, often without realising it. These judgements are probably based on first impressions, the way someone talks, what she talks about, etc. I assume these are prejudices, and I wish I would not feel so convinced that I am right. I would hate it if someone else judged me so quickly in this way, without really giving me a chance.

Too honest, so sometimes I say things without really thinking. I can also sometimes be jealous or paranoid concerning loved ones.

I can be a very stressful person when I am under pressure. I can be very impatient, too (because of my stress) and I am also sometimes extremely rude (because of my father!)

26. What do you rate highly in your friends?

Their sense of humour, their willingness to discuss problems and to be open and direct.

27. On which occasions do you sometimes lie?

I seem to lie a lot and am not entirely aware of the fact, especially when someone phones me and invites me to come to a party, etc. and I do not want to go with this person. I tend to say „Yes, great. I'll probably see you there then.“ Everyone tells white lies so as not to hurt other people's feelings, I suppose. My problem is that if I told the truth other people would either argue with me or else try to persuade me to come around to their opinion.

28. Do you ever buy yourself something extravagant? What would that be?

Jewelry or clothes.

29. What keeps you from sleeping at night?

Too much coffee, worrying or the phone.

30. Is there any building which impressed you more than any other one?

Age impresses me. Old buildings, most of them tend to be churches. Human needs have not changed, and thus in old buildings there is a sense of travelling through time. I went to Florence a few years ago and saw the leaning tower of Pisa on the way. I was awe-struck by the magnitude of the lawns and the three entirely different buildings on them. The tower can only be appreciated if you see it in the entirety of its setting on those lawns. The whiteness contrasted by the green grass, reflecting the sunshine made the place sort of magical for me.

31. As what kind of a person would you like to be remembered after your death?

I would like to be remembered as a person who was able to teach people things which were important for life and most of all as a person who truly practiced what she preached.

32. Can you think of a personal motto?

"Treat every day as if it was your last, as one day you will be right." My dad taught me this and I think that it really rings true. If you need a bit of a shove in order to do something, think of this phrase and you'll soon be doing it. It also works the other way as well though, so beware e.g. this could be the last day I ever eat chocolate, so forget the diet and I'll eat ten bars!!!

My most important one is: "You reap what you sow." (My father). Then: "Always look on the bright side of life". "Treat thy neighbour as thyself." (The bible, my girlfriend). "Count the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves." (My father)

Solutions 1b

Dr. h.c. Rudolf Nissen

Answers to a Questionnaire from "The Guardian"

- Q: What is your idea of perfect happiness?
A: 1. Writing a really good book, with my wife at my side;
2. the sight of something well-shaped, as in architecture, fiction, or engineering;
3. following the flight of birds in the sky; walking cities.
- Q: What is your greatest fear?
A: The black phlegm of the Last Cuppa.
- Q: With which historical figure do you most identify?
A: Sometimes Dr. Johnson, sometimes Goethe, sometimes Frederick II of Sicily.
- Q: Which living person do you most admire?
A: Helmut Jahn? - Studs Terkel? - M.A.K. Halliday? - Hans Magnus Enzensberger? -
Why not all four!
- Q: What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?
A: An inclination to indulge in the impudence of my verbosity.
- Q: What is the trait you most deplore in others?
A: An inclination to indulge in the impudence of their verbosity.
- Q: What is your greatest extravagance?
A: My flights of verbal fancy.
- Q: What objects do you always carry with you?
A: My keys, my watch, my enthusiasm, and something to write (about, as well as with, on or in).
- Q: What makes you depressed?
A: 1. The passionate prejudices, i.e. cruelty, in human nature;
2. dullness, the ditchwater variety;
3. quarrelling with my wife.
- Q: What do you most dislike about your appearance?
A: My sausage-like fingers.
- Q: What is your most unappealing habit?
A: That is certainly for others to decide, not me.
- Q: What is your favourite smell?
A: 1. Olbas;
2. The sea.
- Q: What is your favourite word?
A: "verblüffend"
- Q: What is your favourite building?
A: Taj Mahal? - The State of Illinois Center, Chicago IL.? Durham Cathedral? -
All three, no doubt.
- Q: What is your favourite journey?
A: Always the next one.

- Q: What or who is the greatest love of your life?
A: 1. My wife - and the world of fiction we share;
2. books;
3. "Der Rosenkavalier".
- Q: Which living person do you most despise?
A: I have never really been much of a despiser and I don't think I should now start wasting my energy on what doesn't deserve it.
- Q: What do you consider the most overrated virtue?
A: "Political Correctness".
- Q: On what occasions do you lie?
A: On unimportant occasions. I don't make a habit of it.
- Q: When and where were you happiest?
A: Daydreaming and reading in an apple tree, at fourteen; honeymooning in Dürnstein, Austria, 29 years ago; addressing an audience, spring 1980, in Hamburg; walking Golden Gate Bridge, summer 1989;...
- Q: How do you relax?
A: On beaches, in water, in front of the telly: lazing about, swimming and drifting around and along.
- Q: Which talent would you most like to have?
A: I would like to be able to play the clarinet.
- Q: What keeps you awake at night?
A: Fighting with formulations: the urge to grasp, and re-write, ideas that cross my mind.
- Q: How would you like to die?
A: As late as possible, as sane as possible, and as suddenly as possible.
- Q: How would you like to be remembered?
A: As someone you liked to have about. And because *of some of* the things that *someone* said, and the way he said them.

Solutions: Homework

Wir können einander nicht verstehen, es sei denn auf eine rudimentäre und unvollkommene Art und Weise; wir können uns nicht offenbaren, selbst wenn wir es wollen; was wir Vertrautheit nennen, ist nur ein Notbehelf; perfektes Wissen ist eine Illusion. In einem Roman hingegen können wir Menschen vollkommen kennen, und vom allgemeinen Lesevergnügen abgesehen, können wir hier einen Ausgleich für die Konturlosigkeit der Menschen im richtigen Leben finden. So betrachtet ist Fiktion (Dichtung) wahrhaftiger als Historie (Geschichtsschreibung), denn sie geht über das Nachweisbare hinaus, und jeder von uns weiß doch aus eigener Erfahrung, daß es mehr gibt als das Nachweisbare, und selbst wenn der Autor sich irrt, nun - dann hat er es zumindest versucht. Er kann seine Akteure schon als Babys einführen (vorstellen), er kann es einrichten, daß sie ohne Schlaf und Essen auskommen, er kann sie sich verlieben lassen, verlieben und nichts als verlieben, vorausgesetzt, er weiß scheinbar alles über sie, vorausgesetzt, sie sind seine Geschöpfe. Deshalb kann *Moll Flanders* nicht hier sein; dies ist einer der Gründe, warum auch *Amelia* und *Emma* nicht hier sein können. Dies sind Leute, deren geheimes Leben sichtbar ist oder sichtbar sein könnte: wir sind Leute, deren geheimes Leben unsichtbar bleibt. Und das ist der Grund, warum Romane, selbst wenn sie von grundschtlichen Menschen handeln, uns Trost sein können; sie deuten auf eine menschliche Rasse, die verständlicher und daher leichter zu handhaben ist, sie vermitteln uns die Illusion von Scharfsinn (Klarsicht, Weitsicht, Durchblick) und Macht.