



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2012**

Communication and Culture

COMM4

(Specification 2625)

**Unit 4: Communication and Culture in Practice:
Portfolio**

Report on the Examination

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General

We have now spent three years exploring the potential of this ambitious and challenging module, benefitting in the process from the enthusiastic involvement of students and teachers whilst maintaining high standards of assessment. It is now time to begin to put this learning to use, clarifying and supporting best practice and providing clearer parameters without sacrificing spaces in which experimentation and innovation can take place. Our subject and our approach are dialogic and this conversation about what we do and how we do it must continue in all of the available channels. As an appropriate and commensurate response to centre's invention, commitment and endeavour, we have progressively tried to support and clarify.

There have been new topic grids to facilitate a clearer route from idea to realisation, from Topic (ours) to Title (the student's own). There have been revised mark schemes which better reflect the character of the work candidates are doing, including holistic mark schemes to address the extra demands offered by the 'Creative Work'. There are now, on AQA e-secure, marked and annotated examples of student work which provide a record of the quality standards which we have set in COMM4. These are essential resources for coursework markers: we would like to make it a requirement in future that these exemplars are referenced in each centre's marking (explicitly on Candidate Reference Forms).

In this third year of the A2 Coursework, there were things to celebrate and things which need to be addressed. The moderating team felt that there was a greater assurance and confidence in students' work, especially in the Creative piece. There is no question about students' enthusiasm and engagement with the unit. Much of the work was enjoyable and enlightening, evidencing competencies across a range of media. A good range of topics and themes were tackled in a range of interesting and thought-provoking ways.

Centres had clearly appreciated the re-organisation of the mark scheme adopting a more holistic approach, especially in the Creative work, and hence comments on students' work on the CRFs were detailed, perceptive and helpful to the moderators. The new grid format for the two newer coursework topics generated some very fine examples of motivated work.

Case Studies

This may be a useful place to re-assert the importance of the idea and direction of the 'Case Study': it is a description of what is expected in that students need to select one or two (possibly three) specific examples of text (be it a Music festival, an advertisement, a particular tourist destination, a celebrity) to analyse and contextualise with reference to at least two contrasting perspectives or Key Concepts). The aim is very much to say something about how that text (or texts) contributes to a deeper understanding of our culture. Students' work continues to illuminate a wide range of ideas; often it is coherently argued, interesting and enlightening, thoughtful and perceptive, well-judged, and makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the culture we live in.

The new structure of the two new topics allowed much greater freedom of choice, but there were far too many Case Studies which didn't have a specific title or focus or angle on the theme selected. The theme is still a very generalised idea which must be refined with a specific Case Study focus, different for each student. Generalised discussions, with chunks of 'theory', do NOT a Case Study make!

The following examples drawn from this year's series highlight the differences between clearly focused titles and titles which are insufficiently focused for the purpose of the Case Study:

Clearly directed ones:

- What role does blogging play in the celebrification of our culture, with reference to Guido Fawkes and Katie Price?
- What separates the nationally significant music festival (Glastonbury) from the counter-cultural Tattoo festival and in what way might this symbolise cultural differences in society as a whole?

More problematic:

- Amy Winehouse – From Songstress to Smackhead
- The consequence of consumerism and identity; an exploration of the 21st century consumer

Consumer

The new topics generated some varied and engaged work on a wide range of ideas. 'Consumer', in particular, was energetically taken up with some excellent discussions on products and manufacturers and consumers (savvy or otherwise), tying in neatly, very often, with students' work on Objects of Desire. However, it is also a topic that generated a number of non-discursive pieces of writing. Candidates chose 'easy' targets to vent their wrath on, such as McDonalds, or Disney, or Gucci, (usually adequately supported by a Marxist perspective) and, rather than deconstructing the contested and complex areas, went for the jugular. The personalised, generally discursive essay, or the polemically directed (often with real journalistic flair!) really will not achieve level 4, however 'well-written'. There were, however, interesting close readings of marketing strategies and thorough examination and deconstruction of advertisements.

Festival

The Festival topic also produced interesting work where, again, personal experience and observation has a crucial role to play. Too often, however, contrasts were made with rather flimsy historical support, an assumption that the 'good old days' of non-commercial music festivals generated 'real' community feeling, etc. Indeed the commercial organisation of contemporary music festivals are an easy target, which belies some of the more complex issues that arise in those contexts. For example, without the support and financial backing of major media outlets, the festivals might be a much riskier venture, or even non-existent. The customer numbers rarely seem to go down whatever the price being charged. Perhaps they even provide value for money given the range and quality of the bands one can see in three days! There is a Market Liberal position here....

Celebrity

'No more Case Studies on celebrity' could sound like music to a moderator's ear.... But it is a popular topic, and one that is approached with gusto, real knowledge, is often personally felt (yet discursively handled) and produces some excellent work. It is a topic which allows a range of approaches, from endorsement to technology, and is generally treated with verve and insight. This topic also allows weaker students the opportunity to produce secure level 3 work, but so often it traps potentially more able students into the same level as biographical hagiography intervenes without much direction.

Holiday

Holiday was less popular, but some very good work was evident as students did tackle the complex issues from a very self-aware stance; rather like the excellent work manifest in discussions of the 'green' or 'fair trade' issues in the Consumer topic.

General issues

At the heart of the work that precedes the final vision is research. Research provides students with the evidence and perspectives with which they find out what they want to say. It takes time to digest this material. The best work has examined the selected case studies closely, and has ranged far and wide in the attempt to find out what 'other people' have to say on the subject; the internet is an extraordinarily useful tool in this adventure but isn't necessarily the 'last word' in research. The A2 text book has proved valuable evidently, as have a range of other book references including some specialist cultural texts (not necessarily the 'original' Baudrillard, but frequently rather more readable books about Baudrillard!). The best work uses counter-arguments and research which extracts useful counter-point positions to the student's own view, providing a springboard for further arguments and helping to clarify the writer's stance.

References should go beyond the various 'insta-quote' web-sites. Broadsheet newspapers' on-line sites are very valuable, as is the 'Google scholar' site, and, hopefully, the book references in the Study Guide to the Topics. Perhaps more time could be devoted to this element of the Case Study early in the planning and refining process; the bulk of the research may be undertaken earlier in the academic year (although that may mean making an early choice of Topic and Theme). It may help avoid the Mulvey-isation of Case Studies...

The Case Study is an objective, academic piece of writing and argument is the essential discursive component. As last year there is far too much over-determination of media effect; almost as a matter of course students assert that 'we' (Invariably undefined, interestingly!) are 'bombarded' by the media; there is very little acknowledgement of the role of the consumer/receiver, and evidently no sense of agency among those victims of this assault, who evidently do not include any Communications & Culture Studies students..... On the other hand, students who have studied Marxism are invariably 'savvy' which raises a question as to the identity of the 'dupes'. There are other Marxist approaches other than the Frankfurt school, and at level 4 students have a real opportunity to be complex as they evaluate the contribution, say, a Gramscian perspective might make. Avoidance of the phrase 'this links to...' may helpfully attain higher levels of exposition and integration of theoretical perspectives.

Creative Work

The Creative work is the 'personal' dimension to the Case Study. It is the 'subjective' space in contrast to the 'objective' and academic study. It doesn't need to cover the same material in a different format. In fact the discourse of the media being employed allows students to say things differently and therefore say different things. The rubric for the coursework asks for the Creative piece to 'spring out' of the case study and can take a very different 'cast' and focus from the case study. The Case Study is written to be read by teachers and moderators; the Creative piece is directed at an audience of peers, with different cultural backgrounds and expectations.

Moderators continue to be surprised and amazed by what candidates produce. They 'make us laugh, make us wait, and make us cry', to use Dickens' definitions. There is sometimes an issue when we have to 'wait'.....

Moderators were impressed this year by the 'visible' (and aural) progress in students' construction and competency in this area of the coursework. What began as an idea that

would produce ‘the very best of students’ work’ is beginning to be realised with some panache, wit and insight. Students invariably make clever and illuminating choices of music and sound-track to underscore their visuals, but this year was the first in which they actually submitted original songs (and recordings) as Creative work.

The montages and assemblages of visual ideas were impressive, the editing process making a huge step forward in student handling of ‘found’ material. There was some over-reliance on the scripted talk (Vlog or video-log), or as an essential component. This clearly enabled some students to shovel in mounds of ‘theory’ as evidence of their knowledge. This is really not necessary. The putative audience of Communication and Culture students and peers would be unlikely to tolerate such delivery of information for very long, and certainly not for 9 – 13 minutes! The Case Study has already demonstrated students’ knowledge and application of perspectives; it simply isn’t necessary to repeat it. The mantra of ‘less is more’ is categorically encouraged by the moderating team. Some students managed a density of ideas, images and sounds in 4 or 5 minutes which would easily consume 10 minutes of ‘thinking’ time.

Some students may need reminding that Creative work should develop out of some aspect of the Case Study rather than repeating similar material as a voice-over.

Websites are becoming more popular which clearly offer some interesting opportunities for very effective design work, the incorporation of sound and moving images, and some interesting ways of developing links. The ready-made websites now available online offer an attractive, if simple, alternatives to the movie format, and more experience in this mode could stimulate a range of fascinating possibilities.

Further issues

With reference to the awarding of marks – the key process of standardisation – it is very evident that higher level candidates are being over-rewarded often by at least half a level, which is causing some concern among moderators. Level 4 is rewarded very readily rather than representing a high level of achievement. Not only must there be evidence of a Case Study, academically delivered, with scarcely any typos or grammatical errors, but the register must refer to more than simply ‘specialist terms’. Work at this level should demonstrate the ability to evaluate the differences not only between perspectives, but within perspectives. Marxism isn’t ‘one view’, nor is feminism, and Post-modernism certainly isn’t! It may be helpful to explore different forms of Marxist critiques, thinking rather of Marxisms. A Gramscian Marxist has a very different view of the world from a Frankfurt School Marxist with regard to ‘consumerism and media impact certainly.... This enriches and deepens the complexity of the writing, especially if it’s well-integrated.

Creative work really needs to be ‘creative’ in level 4 – a difficult enough idea to articulate at any time; conventions have clearly been established by the range of examples produced so far, and students reproduce those conventions very credibly: the ‘one spoken word = one image’ production has much to commend it in terms of generating excitement and interest at the beginning of a piece, but more than 2 minutes of it in an seven minute argument ceases to be ‘creative’ – it’s simply a relatively effective patterning of response.

The documentary interview is also becoming part of the canon of Creative work; personal, invariably structured and scripted, and occasionally with an appropriate mis-en-scene. But questions and answers, editing and mis-en-scene really need to be carefully considered and structured.

The parody is certainly gaining ground, with some extravagant conceits taking place; but again, it needs to be handled much more rigorously than what is available at the moment to achieve genuinely startling or shocking or humorous effect.

Finally, at next year's feedback and standardisation meetings, centres should be aware that the use of the exemplar scripts on the secure AQA web-site, for which every teacher should have a log-in and password, will be 'required' as reference points for the comments on the CRF forms. Centres ought to be able to justify their marks by reference to the Standardised work.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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