



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

Communication and Culture

COMM1

(Specification 2625)

**Unit 1: Understanding Communication and
Culture**

Report on the Examination

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Overview

“January, sick and tired, you’ve been hanging on me...” (Pilot)

And so we come again to the territories of Communication and Culture (and ‘communication and culture’). For the third session running the mean achieved by candidates on COMM1 has increased. This is not a concern but rather an index of your success since it is reflected in the work that we are seeing, much of which is ‘good’ as the mean mark suggests. And just as pleasing is the manner of this improvement.

When the specification was redeveloped, one of the stated aims was to try to address the ‘teaching to the test’ mentality that had taken some of the shine off the otherwise largely positive impacts of ‘Curriculum 2000’. We have tried to marry a more open specification, where you make lots of choices about the specifics of course content, to a more open model of assessment. This is about refining a still transparent model in order to lessen the importance of the tests in favour of the course. Each sitting of COMM1 has seen a decline in the systematic ‘prepared answer’ approach and in its place an increasing confidence in the use of Communication & Culture concepts and approaches. Though all involved appreciate that this test has a set structure, the real ‘news’ is that the course itself is being more successfully ‘engaged’.

COMM1 remains a challenge and not only because of the pressures imposed by Time (that keeper of alms for oblivion). The questions, even the nature of the stimuli, continue to delight, frustrate and challenge. This session offered Christmas Shopping, celebrity and the West Midlands Police, surely a combination to celebrate!

Question One: ‘Culture’

The nature of this question was somewhat academic and perhaps some candidates were taken aback by this. Here was a key concept of AS contextualised in the question and offered up for further exemplification in one of three ‘cultural practices’. Crudely this meant three things were to be asked of ‘code’: ‘what?’, ‘where?’ and ‘how?’. Most candidates were much the best on ‘where?’ and least secure with ‘what codes are’. Very few defined ‘code’ either directly or indirectly, even as sign-systems with rules and shared understandings, preferring practice to theory. This is not a criticism, just a further reminder that this vital AS concept merits genuine exploration and use. It is after all central to the unspoken critical perspective of AS Communication & Culture, Structuralism. More work on structuralist readings of culture remain preferable to the occasional bouts of undigested Marxism and Post-modernism.

The three options were not equally popular nor equally well done. The biggest group attempted ‘Christmas Shopping’ and found it difficult to deconstruct and decode. Many made progress on the ‘rituals’ involved though fewer went on to consider how choices of present might construct a picture of social norms and values in Britain in Olympics year. ‘Sitting this exam’ was almost as popular and here the distraction was the formal rules of ‘sitting’ which took some listing and explaining. Better reading looked into what might lie behind these ‘protokols’. Best and fewest answers were on ‘arranging dates’, not especially because they drew heavily on personal experience on this occasion but rather because they were more easily read in terms of cultural meanings. Verbal and non-verbal codes also drifted more naturally into these responses.

Question Two: ‘Communication’

This question was best done in all three of its manifestations. It is regularly the best opportunity to present both subject knowledge and pertinent personal examples. Arguably both candidates and marks followed a sensible pattern: part (a) that self-presentation is “unconscious and unplanned” tempted fewest candidates and averaged the lowest mark in Question 2. Conversely part (c) that self-presentation is about conscious and unconscious elements averaged more highly.

There were really few problems here. There were lots of good use of Goffman, of Johari and of notions of the self and identity and sound examples, the best of which were specific rather than generic.

Question Three: ‘Toolkits’

Question 3 returned to a more conventional text and a set of accessible questions which were often done very well. For the first time notions of ‘audience’ and ‘appeal’/ ‘address’ were interrogated alongside sign choice.

As ever there was a wide range of achievement here though the mean remains strong enough.

(a) Audience

Many were caught out by the unintended trap in this question. While this text does picture two elderly women its address is explicitly to “make our communities feel safety” which suggests an audience broader than ‘old women’ or ‘the elderly’. Many missed this carelessly.

(b) This part was very well done on the whole with secure identification of the approaches and methods employed by the text to address and appeal to its audiences, however conceived in part (a.)

(c) The technical terms ‘syntagm’ and ‘paradigm’ were not a requirement here, though they sometimes proved useful. What was essential was the evidence that meaning was being ‘manufactured’ both in and by the text, that detailed sign choices had implications for the text’s meanings. This was tackled gainfully by most though where a question was missed it was often this one.

Question Four: ‘Everyday Life’

And so another departure: part of a lyric to prompt a discussion of celebrity. The question explicitly asked for the lyric to be used as a starting point and most candidates obliged. There is plenty in Lily Allen’s studied ingenuousness to engage important issues and many were helped by Lily towards a coherent response. Others got caught in an explication of the lyric (though some of these readings were bizarre) and didn’t get further than this. A number also merely recounted celebrity stories and failed to evidence the value that our subject might bring to the argument.

The better responses invariably brought a method to bear upon this unseen subject, identifying the elements that constituted ‘celebrity’ before subjecting them to scrutiny. These then became active readings of the ‘character’, function’ and ‘status’ of the celebrity and of ‘celebrity’ in contemporary society. Most seemed to understand celebrity as a corrupting influence and as evidence of declining standards in pretty much all aspects of our cultural life. Others made very clear distinctions between those who ‘deserve’ celebrity and those

who don't. Reality TV remains a fascination, since nearly all commentators both deplore it and have extensive knowledge of it (both inside and outside of this exam).

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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