General Certificate of Education

GCE Communication and Culture

COMM1

Report on the Examination

2009 examination - June series

Preamble

As this was the first year of Communication and Culture the feedback will be more detailed and more discursive. A more detailed response to this summer's assessments is provided with a broader contextualisation of these units within the specification's content and values. This process must start with significant praise for candidates and their teachers who took something of a leap into the unknown. What was seen by examiners and moderators alike was plenty of genuine, engaged, informed work, with evidence of a rigorous yet enjoyable set of learning experiences and an appropriate range of theoretical material and examples. All comments about 'weaknesses' in answers across the two units must be read in the context of this success.

Unit One: Understanding Communication and Culture

Overview

Looking back:

"It is in self-limitation that a master first shows himself." (Goethe)

Perhaps the most drastic change to the course, and certainly to AS was the introduction of short answer questions. Candidates had minutes to answer questions based on the salient features of the course, the key concepts and the essential content. The time constraint put a premium on efficiency and therefore on understanding. Candidates and their teachers responded positively to these changes and as a result examiners and moderators were given a very positive first taste of the new 'flavour' of AS assessment. The abiding issues were:

- Candidates produced some exemplary work where there was a combination of knowledge, solid reference to theory, theorists and concepts, highly secure use and application of technical register, good critical thinking skills, fluent writing style and an awareness of structure.
- There was also much competent work where candidates had ample opportunity to show what they knew and understood, in a context where their own examples were particularly valued and encouraged.
- There were comparatively few candidates who failed to complete the paper. Equally, comparatively few candidates found any great need to exceed the allocated space.
- Markers felt that this was an enabling paper with very few questions unanswered or completely misunderstood. It was also a discriminating paper, in which candidates performed across the whole mark range. Examiners found a real range of marks and it proved relatively easy to differentiate between the levels.

Examiners also said that they enjoyed marking the paper which says much for the quality of work candidates produced.

Looking forward:

COMM1 is a 'reading' paper: reading Culture, reading Communication, reading a text and finally reading the Meanings and Practices of Everyday Life. It is therefore largely a test of the degree to which the course has given candidates a sound knowledge and understanding of the key concepts. Without the time for a 'discursive feint' (writing around areas where knowledge is less secure) candidates were properly confronted with the state of their own knowledge and understanding.

None of the groups whom some feared might be disadvantaged by this paper seem to have been significantly 'put out' by it. The most academic had plenty of opportunity to show what they could do (in that productive 'self-limitation' that Goethe speaks of above) and the least academic appreciated the scaffolding that took them at least to 3c). Of course, short answers (and plenty of them) do expose those who know little and understand less and there are those who really cannot handle the test (and properly get 10-20 out of 80) but this discrimination across the range is what we are after. Formal assessment is, after all, crudely about turning a student population into a rank order with as many gradations (and as few 'degradations') as possible. The broader the range of feasible marks (as in 'regularly used by markers'), the more securely we can create robust grade boundaries.

This is a paper also with a dependable structure, partly designed to provide reassurance to candidates and teachers alike. However, this reassurance is not to be seen as a green light to teach the answers/prepare answers. It is rather a clear step away from the 'teaching to the tests' mentality that has permeated education in recent times. Only question four is really unpredictable, which allows discrimination across the mark range.

In these contexts, what is done with the question is perhaps a key performance indicator, hence the need for confidence with the concepts rather than encyclopaedic knowledge. Those who show independent thought on issues will naturally be highest rewarded but secure understanding of the key concepts is the best preparation. This is crudely what the course is about and best prepares candidates for a key question examiners ask of higher level work: "does this candidate _really_ understand the scope and potential of the question?"

The challenge of improvement over the next few years lies here (and not in second-guessing the details of the sections). How can the candidate who is rehearsing the key ideas and applying a relevant register be moved into Level 4? These candidates have been taught well but have taken on board ideas without really understanding the full implications. Some of these 'ideas' relate to aspects of the A2 Theoretical Perspectives, which are assuredly not a passport to top marks (since they are not required and contravene to some extent the spirit of AS). What is needed is 'more thinking' not more fancy terms.

It was gratifying to see that some candidates are already familiar with A2 theoretical approaches but:

1.   It was not necessary to use these in order to reach the highest level (including top mark)

2.   There was some evidence that candidates' efforts were undermined by a partial or insecure grasp of such approaches

3.   The key concepts are the foundation of AS study; it would be unwise to sacrifice a firm grounding in these in order to embark on more demanding theoretical work.

In terms of AS key concepts, the COMM1 paper reinforces all of them. As the AS Teacher Support Materials suggested the AS course is organised around issues of 'Identity', personal and social. For most teachers this refocusing of otherwise familiar material is 'in progress'. Hopefully this examination, as one half of the assessment of almost entirely the same content and concepts will help to both underline this shift and thus reassure teachers. As the format of the examination paper formally addresses the specification content it will also hopefully clarify, confirm and, to some extent, negotiate this. However what leads us is the 'Subject Content', as specified on page 5 of the specification, which for AS is expressed as follows:

"Both units deal with the personal level of communication and candidates' own experience of cultural products and cultural practices. The interaction between the individual and the broader cultural environment is a key area of investigation."

This is then supplemented by the eight key concepts. We can all make these a little more significant in our work across the course and particularly in preparing for this examination. Key concepts, unlike other content 'items', need to be explored and applied rather than 'known' and this flexibility and understanding is what the course is trying to promote.

Question One: 'Culture'

Looking back:

Examiners relished the opportunity to reward candidates for both conceptual material and the use of personal examples and experience. This twin focus (ultimately two routes to success) is very much a feature of COMM1 as it was in the legacy specification; some candidates respond best from practice, others from theory. There was quite a strong emphasis on theorists and formal definitions and occasionally explicit use of critical perspectives (Marxism, Postmodernism etc). The latter, as has been said, cannot expect extra reward but might have provided evidence of understanding the real issues. There were some interesting references to hegemony, ideology and culture being used as a tool of social control, but for some of the weaker candidates a little of this kind of learning proved a dangerous thing.

Clearly centres engaged with 'the culture debate', particularly with relation to High and Popular Culture, and candidates were well versed in definitions and opinions even if these often defined Popular Culture in terms of High Culture. Examiners reported some really impressive understanding of the cultural debate, which bodes well as we begin to explore beyond the High/Popular dichotomy. Candidates were able to furnish a range of interesting examples. This examiner's experience was common: "I am reading a lot about Raymond Williams being a champion of popular culture and that Matthew Arnold believes that culture is the "best that has been thought and said" followed by a list of popular culture pursuits."

If problems occurred they were less likely to be problems with the key concept 'Culture' as with what to do with it. Two other key concepts referenced in the question were less securely handled. The first was 'Value', the understanding of which was essential for higher marks and in the option (b) 'Identity', which in many responses was loosely translated as 'Taste'.

Perhaps the most significant evidence that for many candidates 'Value' was not really a key course 'issue' was the remarkable absence of responses to option (a). The proposition that popular cultural texts might be "sophisticated and complex" is perhaps the easiest to evidence but only if you realise that sophistication and complexity are potential criteria for 'Value'. Very few candidates answered this option, preferring to focus on 'Identity' in (b) and 'Popularity' in (c). The (b) responses found it easier to provide a critical focus.

The best answers were doing what was hitherto done in A2 with equal knowledge, understanding and panache; providing full evidence for the usefulness of the key concept 'Context'. These answers take the stock (and essential) phrases of the culture debate and make them contextually specific; without this a 'play' like Raymond Williams' "culture is ordinary" is little more than a soundbite.

Looking forward:

This section is NOT about the High/Popular Culture Debate.
The key issue is that this section of the paper addresses 'The Nature of Culture', of which 'High and Popular Culture' is merely one bullet point of four. Unlike the current CMS5, this exploration of culture and value will not be limited to a stock set of 'pros' and 'cons' of High/Popular Culture. The essence here is opening the debates and not teaching answers to specific questions. Candidates should be prepared to evaluate 'definitions of culture' rather than attempt to learn all that might have been usefully said. Equally, they can be expected to assess arguments about cultural value without classifying every cultural variety.

What remained unexplored in CMS5 might provide a fruitful set of contexts, but it is a critical attitude and vocabulary that is required here. Perhaps these prompts will prove useful. However, they are not prescriptive:

- explore definitions of culture (any/many)
- explore ideas about the nature of, for example, popular culture, mass culture, elite culture, class culture, subculture, national culture
- evaluate competing claims about the value of cultural forms.

Question Two: 'Communication'

Looking back:

The content of this question was much more familiar to teachers in AS and as a result knowledge was most secure. Add to this the nature of the question and the helpful paper design (and presence of 'Time') and the first thing achieved was a super efficient version of the legacy CMS3. Candidates were able to offer a selection of their 'personal communication' knowledge in a way that made this easy to recognise and reward. Teachers also, in the deliberate absence of a requirement in the specification, had maintained only the most useful material from CMS3 (and in doing so had made their own definitions of 'useful' which their candidates endorsed in their work). This is how the open nature of the specific content is meant to work. Teachers, on this evidence, have more than justified the faith that has been put in them. This shift from a specification and assessment led curriculum back towards a teacher/student led version is the major ongoing task. Making the content work is an excellent achievement in this the first run.

The next step is to address the other aspect of the shift which is from 'knowledge' to 'application', from 'content items' to 'cultural codes'. The limitation of the question for many candidates was an ability to address the question focus: 'Identity'. As a result the body language option, which was by far the most popular, tended to address emotional state and the personal possessions option tended to address personality. On the whole responses which talked about 'speech' found it easiest to get into 'who we are'. In the circumstances this variable focus was not treated unduly punitively but it is a useful focus for teaching next year. Crudely it is not about 'knowing', for example, 'NVC' but rather reading it and its implications.

Some candidates ignored the emboldened invitation to merely consider ONE option here which will almost certainly limit them one way or another.

Looking forward:

There is very little to say, save a reinforcement of the point above. This question is about personal communication. It is concerned with seeing ourselves and others as texts and identifying the conventions associated with reading these texts.

Question Three: 'Toolkits'

Looking back:

Question Three proved for some candidates to be their best section and for others their worst. As the questions got shorter the amount of room available to dodge relevance almost disappeared and this caused candidates to fairly regularly opt out. Unfortunately, when they did so it was most often the ten mark 'semiotic analysis' section they dodged. Interestingly it was also true that about half of the attempts made at this sub-question significantly lacked a semiotic vocabulary (but thankfully not a semiotic approach). It seems clear that here there is a clear and necessary period of readjustment:

- that the term 'semiotic' had not been as widely headlined and therefore candidates did not associate knowledge they had with this question
- that the reconfiguration of the specification and removal of a formal text analysis paper (CMS2) had caused some teachers to play down the importance of toolkits (and specifically the well-known set of terms).

Certainly there was no problem at all with either a) (Anchorage) or b) (Intention and Barriers) or with the text chosen, though as ever there were bizarre readings (students are not penalised for outlandish readings if the text is used as evidence). Some felt the mark scheme for this section 'quite generous' though it was also a place where a lack of knowledge became apparent. The 'spacings' on the paper worked very well (and were adhered to) and in c) candidates were challenged.

Looking forward:

This is a text analysis section, albeit a very focused one. It is partly to reinforce the continued importance, even centrality, of the 'toolkits' to our subject. These are every bit as important, if not more important, in Communication and Culture as they were on the Legacy specification. They constitute one of the three sub-headings in the COMM1 content as well as being the basis for the readings in COMM2. The 'Key Terms' section in the Teacher Resource Bank specifies the range of technical vocabulary and this question will, each session, test the ability of candidates to apply this knowledge to a range of texts and other cultural products.

Question Four: 'AS synoptic'/'Communication and Culture'

Looking back:

For many teachers this area of assessment was the cause of much anxiety, for understandable reasons:

- it was the most unknown area of a new examination
- it purports to be a test of conceptual understanding rather than specific content knowledge

- it includes a written stimulus to which students respond
- it is properly synoptic (requires the course to be brought to a kind of closure)
- it works to some extent against the grain of contemporary assessment driven education.

It would be patronising to say that on the basis of this first run those fears were misplaced, but massive credit must be given to teachers and their students for the quality and variety of work produced. While nearly all candidates must to some extent have been taken aback by the invitation to explore the cultural significance of Trinny Woodall's underarm hair, most took a deep breath and got stuck in.

The fact that we were addressing twenty five minutes work at the end of an examination makes the very positive responses of examiners all the more commendable.

- "Some excellent answers here which deal with ideology, gender constructs, belonging, value, codes, census. A very wide range of different 'sorts' of responses to this question."
- "Some are anecdotal, some with a degree of personal angst! (which can also be rewarded)."
- "A provocative article which the most able candidates have responded to critically and others on a more basic level personally (but even these answers are relevant)."
- "Question Four does allow some high flyers to really respond in an inventive and interesting manner, using a range of Communication and Culture theory."
- "The most varied set of responses. Engaging answers if 'theory light'."
- "It may be too much to expect sophistication but what we did get were spirited answers, an engagement which also speaks of a quality response."

Some candidates got a little sidetracked by celebrity, other candidates by the intrusiveness of the British Press but the beauty of the open brief is that it allows space to reward the ability to show a course of study.

Looking forward:

This question addresses the AS course best expressed in 'The Meanings and Practices of Everyday Life'. There is a lot of pressure on the quality of the question and openness of the issue and on the willingness of teachers to allow their candidates space to think through the evidence about our culture(s) and values which is made available by, and through, cultural products and practices every day. Trying to spot a likely area for a question will hopefully prove futile; working on students' identified examples because they are interesting will prove more fruitful.

Final thoughts

If this first run is anything to go by we can look forward to a successful and innovative specification, not because of our questions, but because of candidates' stimulating and enabling answers.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the **Results statistics** page of the AQA Website.