General Certificate of Education

Communication and Culture

COMM1   Understanding Communication and Culture

Report on the Examination

2010 examination - June series

General

As Communication and Culture reaches A2 it important that we continue to both reflect upon the performances of candidates and support the development of this new and increasingly popular specification. This will mean comments on both the assessment specifications and a broader contextualisation of these units within the specification's content and values. As last year this process must start with significant praise for candidates and their teachers who once again showed their faith in us. There is ample evidence that the course is proving interesting and enjoyable to its cohort. It is important to remember this overall positive as we pick through the kinds of issues raised by the specific papers and coursework assessments.

COMM1: Understanding Communication and Culture

Overview

"Time is the negative element in the sensual world." (Hegel)

This is the third set of what last year's report described as 'four short encounters with the salient features of the course: key concepts and essential content'. Once again candidates (and their teachers) have responded positively to these constraints and examiners have seen a very good range of engaged and often engaging work.

- There was some exemplary and remarkable work which demonstrated 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 awareness of structure
- There was also a lot of competent work where candidates are having ample opportunity to show what they know and understand, in a context where their own examples are particularly valued and encouraged.
- Again, there were comparatively few candidates who failed to complete the paper, though where questions were missed they were less often Question 4. Given the time limitations there were an amazing number of candidates who actually sought extra paper and often wrote dense three sided academic essays reminiscent of the old A level 45 minute essay
- Examiners found a real range of marks and it proved relatively easy to differentiate between the levels (which are the same as those used in the COMM2 coursework).

Looking Forward:

This is a paper which is settling down to a hopefully dependable structure, partly designed to provide reassurance to candidates and teachers alike. Only time will tell whether this clear step away from the 'teaching to the tests' mentality will be embraced by teachers who remain under extreme pressure to 'succeed'. It is hoped that both the papers and these reports will provide further clarification and encouragement. All the questions offer a stimulus of sorts so the ability to apply concepts and provide examples are the most valuable skills: 'confidence with concepts' remains a pertinent prompt. As one of the Senior examiners for this unit wrote, "It's really important to make centres aware of how powerful the concepts are for students in the exam: internalisation of the concepts is definitely something we will be working on with our candidates this year."

There was certainly some second guessing of the details of the sections, to no great avail and a persistence of often undigested ideas taken from A2 Theoretical Perspectives, which equally gave no great advantage. Given that many candidates struggle to effectively use these more sophisticated tools at A2, our ongoing advice has to be to respectfully suggest that time spent

exploring AS concepts (and most especially 'code') will be time better spent both to extend AS and prepare for A2.

It is understandable that with new centres joining and existing centres refocusing on issues of personal and cultural identity, there will be a period of adjustment that we are hopefully alleviating with our papers, marking regimes and INSET.

As mentioned in last year's report, what leads us is the 'Subject Content' for AS, as specified on page 5 of the specification:

"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."

It is this 'project' that is to be supported by work with the eight key concepts. Key concepts, unlike other content 'items' need to be explored and applied rather than 'known' and this flexibility and understanding is what the specification is trying to promote.

Question One: 'Culture'

Something between a very small minority and a significant minority of candidates and centres ignored the clear steer in last year's report: "This section is NOT about the High/Popular Culture Debate". While we are not punitive in our assessments, writing a prepared answer to something other than the question that is set is unlikely to be successful. With 'fashion' this was sometimes useful though attempting Body Language as High/Low Culture was rarely easy. Certainly the High/Popular culture debate is one aspect of the work expected on culture and proved useful when applied with discretion both here and in Question 4. More important here was an understanding of ideas of cultural practice and of cultural products. Pleasingly both of these phrases were regularly found in the discourse of candidates. Others wrote convincingly about self-identity in 1(a) or offered lots of relevant examples in 1(b).

'Fashion' was overwhelmingly assumed to be synonymous with 'clothing', probably because of the stimulus quote, but some considered other areas of fashion (cars, iPads, homes, tattoos etc). Body Language tended to provoke descriptive answers with many not really considering cultural influences or even differences. Class and gender were well tackled and subcultures were a popular area (Goths and Chavs mainly and both seen as 'other'/ negatively). Ethnicity was dealt with simplistically (Saris and Burkhas) and age hardly mentioned.

It is to be hoped that both the premise of the question (that culture influences aspects of our practice) and the specific alternatives (appearance and body language) were familiar enough to candidates to allow room for some thoughts about the specifics in either case. The preference was for 'clothes' perhaps as a response to the COMM2 topic area, but also surely as a statement about the priorities of the teenage audience. For those who struggled, perhaps body language would have proved more straightforward, with 'influence' perhaps slightly easier to address. 'Influence' was certainly the performance indicator, though this was often implicit in discussions about how sub-cultural groups, for example, expressed their various identities.

There was certainly plenty of opportunity for a demonstration of the usefulness (in every sense) of AS key concepts, particularly code, context, identity, identity, value and, of course, culture.

Question Two: 'Communication'

This remains the section of the question paper where explicit knowledge is most readily and explicitly presented. It will clearly take a little while for centres to fully accommodate the new focus of the social psychological aspects of the content in around the concepts of identity and context. This question offered a potential step in that direction. The focus was 'self-presentation' with positional statements largely derived from Goffman but broad enough to prompt various combinations of identity in context. Thus options a) and c) addressed the largely external and internal ways we "make the face to meet the faces that we meet" and b) introduced those with whom we perform ourselves.

This prompted lots of work on the Johari window and core self and Goffman but less on identity or discussions about 'real' self. Also, unlike the rest of the question paper, explicit content in terms of knowledge eclipsed examples, which had a greater tendency to be generic. Also in a small but significant number of cases, unprecedented in the previous papers, this question was skipped. This may have been an explicit time management technique but it also suggested that some were unfamiliar with or uncertain about 'self-presentation'. Sincerity 2(c) was a minority choice whereas 2(a) and 2(b) were popular choices.

Question Three: 'Toolkits'

Question 3 once again "proved for some candidates to be their best section and for others their worst". There was some, but significantly less opting out, though many found the explicit focus fairly demanding. As the question focus narrows so too does your ability to avoid it. This was the explicit intention of the short question approach. Candidates had previously been expertly prepared for a text analysis which ended up testing very little beyond their ability to use a teacher's critical frame. Now, hopefully, that 'framing' can prepare candidates just as effectively for the 'live' readings they do in COMM2 while here they are asked to 'merely' show how tools are used. It is also very much a test of codes and contexts as befits an AS course whose initial (if unspoken) theoretical perspective is Structuralism.

The codes under scrutiny here were shape, size and language. The shortest question was very specific and perhaps threw many by its simplicity. Given that it was described as a bookmark maybe some candidates were reluctant to explore this most obvious and significant 'fact'/ feature. Certainly many ignored shape and size altogether and wrote about everything else. This left relatively accessible marks for those who simply thought through the impact of a handy, bookmark-shaped informative advert for Quick Reads if only at the level that it is both a perfect index of 'reading' and less likely to be thrown away (the danger for all advertising material). A significant number of candidates seemed unsure of what was mean when asked about the text (thinking this was only the words).

The language question was better answered with the relatively meagre amount of words a necessity and advantage which allowed candidates to score with versions of anchorage, colloquialism, idiom, accessibility, engagement and 'poetry'. 'Versions' being candidates own understandings of this set of points expressed in their own language as well as (and instead of) the terminology of the course.

Barriers is a classic piece of old Communications knowledge which was variably addressed partly due to the variable coverage of term: some offered formal versions encompassing classifications like 'semantic' and 'psychological' and 'mechanical' while others just wrote generally about impediments. Most candidates had something to say, usually about the projected audience.

In operation this section feels less like a text analysis and more like a test of content, which was partly the original intention. The text is incidental to this process (in future of course it may not be a text in this sense but rather a cultural product like a credit card or a Porsche Boxster) but choice of text remains to some degree significant. What is required is something self-contained and accessible but not necessarily engaging to the audience of candidates (there's not time to enjoy the text). The Quick reads text seemed to both fulfil these requirements and work.

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

This question of Food was by all accounts the most successful Question 4 to date. Very few candidates failed to attempt the question. It could easily stand as a model for what this section is designed to do. It presented an essential aspect of everyday life, some prompts and allowed candidates to approach the area as they liked. Although some candidates may have been surprised by the question, most approached it enthusiastically and produced sound answers. Teachers should be advised that the most predictable thing about Question 4 is that it will not be predictable - that, really, is the point.

As the stimulus text was a (deeply edited) segment from an academic source, it was thought best to keep this significantly shorter than last year's piece on Trinny's underarm hair. This seemed to work and most candidates were able to see the stimulus as a very useful prompt for potential areas of discussion. That said, the question was open to all relevant approaches from 'festival' eating (Eid to Glastonbury) to the expectations on men and women with regard to eating out. The vast majority of candidates could see the potential and there was an enormous variety of response. Even 'weaker' candidates gave quite lengthy responses, making simple but relevant points. Many candidates wrote extensive answers covering an enormous range of cultural issues and still found time to apply key concepts, remarkable in such a short time at the end of the exam.

At the heart of the question were the various functions of food as a set of cultural codes: in choice and status of foodstuffs, in preparation and presentation, in rituals and behaviours, as emblematic of cultural divisions and alliances. All the examiners seemed to enjoy marking this question due to the range and ingenuity of responses.

The following list is indicative of the range of responses seen:

- Ethical areas (sourcing, organic, GM, 3rd world, vegetarianism/veganism, McDonaldisation))
- Political (health, 5 a day, Jamie Oliver, alcohol, obesity, diabetes)
- Gender (fat is a feminist issue, stereotypes, expectations (white wine for the lady), the way to a man's heart...who cooks/carves, anorexia)
- Class, Age, Family, Norms/etiquette, Social rituals/celebrations, Ethnic/national ID
- Religion (bread & wine, offerings, fasting, dietary laws.... as one candidate said ' even God must care a lot about food')
- Sex (aphrodisiacs)

Some candidates went for breadth, some for depth and some achieved both. As one candidate concluded her answer..... 'you are what you eat'.