General Certificate of Education

Communication and Culture

COMM3 Communicating Culture

Report on the Examination

2010 examination - June series

General

It was a great pleasure to discover that the majority of candidates were very well prepared for the demands of this first 'live' COMM3 paper. Subject teachers have clearly taken advantage of the many opportunities available to them to smooth the transition from old specification to new. There were extremely few examples of rubric errors or serious misinterpretations of the tasks or misunderstandings of the nature of the exam; it seems that most who sat the paper knew what to expect and organised their time and efforts accordingly.

As the first cohort complete the process it is worth reiterating some of the underlying principles that guided the new specification and the ways in which we have sought to implement these principles in the COMM3 examination. It was always the intention to devise a specification that would be more closely integrated than its predecessor with clear lines of progression linking AS and A2 units. Progression here refers not only to the depth and complexity of the subject's content material but also to the levels of analytical, creative and communicative abilities required and tested by the units. Hence, COMM1 does not put a high premium on the ability to assemble well-formulated, discursive academic essays. It does, though, introduce students to different 'ways of seeing' cultural codes, practices and products, so that they are increasingly familiar with different arguments and the sorts of evidence that may be used to support or refute these arguments. The relatively short answers required by the COMM1 exam are stepping stones towards the more exacting requirements of the longer responses required in COMM3. By this stage students should be thoroughly familiar with competing ideas and arguments, whether it is in evaluating them (Section A) or developing and illustrating their own (Section B).

On the evidence of the first cohort to traverse the new specification, it does seem that this approach has been largely vindicated. There has been plenty of evidence of more accomplished work (vis a vis the predecessor specification) in COMM1 (more focused, more inventive, more personal) and, now, in COMM3 (more analytical, more conceptually aware and more adept in dealing with arguments).

Having emphasised the contrasts between Communication Studies examinations and Communication and Culture examinations, we should also emphasise the continuity. CMS5 and CMS6 were particularly successful in achieving high levels of differentiation and in enabling candidates to profit from very good teaching practice at A2. It has been the intention to build on these achievements whilst simultaneously addressing such problem areas as the proliferation of formulaic responses and the tendency for answers to rehearse rather than apply conceptual knowledge. In CMS5, the old specification paper which COMM3 most closely resembles, the reliably predictable nature of Section A led, understandably enough, to predictable responses. The degree to which individual candidates could fine tune prepared answers to the specificity of the question became too heavily weighted as an assessment criterion. For this reason the format of Section A has changed so that topic knowledge is relegated in significance as we require candidates to 'think on their feet' by applying knowledge of theoretical approaches and key concepts to a pair of strongly contrasting arguments. As far as the topic which these arguments address is concerned we have undertaken that:

- It will always be within the broad area of communication and culture
- It will be accessible and reasonably familiar to A2 candidates (though there is no expectation that the topic itself will have been studied)
- Terms that are technical or specialist but outside the Communication and Culture mainstream will be explained in the preamble.

Additionally, there is both continuity and change in Section B. The continuity is in the sense that candidates are expected to have studied one or more sites in considerable detail, with

emphasis on key concepts, theoretical approaches and the judicious use of in-depth case study material.

Section A

Question 1

Candidates who performed well in this section were clearly accustomed to the close and critical scrutiny of arguments such as those presented in Question 1. Answers that gained marks in Level 4 were able to recognise underlying suppositions implicit in the two arguments and were able to deploy theoretical approaches and key concepts to good effect in their evaluations. The evidence of evaluation was, of course, a key discriminator and certainly the key to the top band of marks. Some answers, perfectly legitimately, evaluated the arguments in terms of their form. It is a good idea to consider the mode of expression of arguments, but this should be complemented by further discussion of the premises of the arguments; though not necessarily to preclude debates about the collapse of distinctions between form and content.

Many good answers supplied further contextual material relating, for example, to the ownership and political orientation of *The Sun*. This was interesting and useful, but it should be stressed that this sort of background information was by no means necessary to achieve marks right up to the top of Level 4.

Some candidates chose to employ a 'blueprint' approach whereby all of the theoretical approaches (and, sometimes, their variants) were applied to the two arguments in turn. This self-imposed formula often produced much for examiners to reward but also led to redundant (and questionable) assertions such as 'post-colonialists would have little to say about Argument A'. It really isn't necessary for candidates to demonstrate a comprehensive familiarity with *all* of the theoretical approaches and all of the key concepts in their answers. This is why the question included a reference to *selected* perspectives and concepts. The best answers tended to use conceptual material selectively and appropriately, facilitating a deeper and more critical analysis of the arguments.

Inevitably, the two arguments themselves include versions of theoretical approaches, albeit not explicitly referenced. For example, Argument B mentions and briefly encapsulates Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Perhaps seeing the arguments as fully rounded theoretical statements, some candidates interpreted the task very narrowly, choosing to summarise or paraphrase the two arguments before stating, with limited supporting evidence, which one they preferred. Such responses tended to score marks in the mid-Level 2 region though those (and there were many) which furnished their summaries with apposite and contrasting examples were able to achieve marks on the Level 2/Level 3 borderline. Marks above this range were largely confined to answers that were able to move beyond description and illustration towards analysis and evaluation.

Question 1 provides an opportunity for candidates to demonstrate their interests and enthusiasms as well as their ability to engage actively with issues that are central to the study of Communication and Culture. If they are used to debating contemporary issues and thre meanings and practices of life from an informed Communication and Culture perspective they will surely do well in Section A.

Section B

Question 2

This question was (and will continue to be) about the *intersection* between any two of the three cultural sites. Good answers, therefore, need to demonstrate not only a firm grasp of the two sites, but, more pertinently, a thorough understanding of the links between these sites: the boundary territory. A number of answers fell at the second of these hurdles. Relatively weak answers such as these simply dealt with two sites separately and independently with no consideration at all of the 'relationship'.

At the other end of the scale, there were some extremely impressive and highly rewarded responses that fully acknowledged and reflected the complexity of the question. These answers dealt with, for example, the means of investing desirability into a space or place such as a new house or a tourist destination; or the ways in which fictions are woven into objects of desire via marketing and advertising.

A relatively small number of candidates attempted Question 2 and they tended to polarise into those who recognised the demands of the question as described in the paragraph above and those who underestimated the sophistication of the task. For the latter group, the choice of question was probably unwise as they may well have achieved more marks by attempting an alternative question with a stronger focus on a single cultural site.

Question 3

A generic question in this style will also be a feature of future COMM3 papers. Here, candidates are invited to select one of the three cultural sites and respond to a task that will invariably focus on theoretical approaches and/or key concepts. On this occasion the focus of the question was ideology. Admittedly, this is a complex and difficult concept which is subject to multiple definitions, interpretations and applications. However, it is also a concept that is central to the study of Communication and Culture at this level and it is a key feature in understanding and comparing theoretical approaches. It was rather worrying, therefore, to discover that quite a few candidates attempted this question with either no comprehension or extremely limited comprehension of ideology. Often, ideology was treated as a simple synonym for belief: not a particularly helpful formulation.

Fortunately, there were also examples of candidates with a very sophisticated and secure understanding. These were able to produce well-illustrated answers that dealt with ideology from the point of view of contrasting theoretical approaches, notably feminism, Marxism and postcolonialism. The site most widely chosen here was Objects of Desire and there were some interesting and thoughtful discussion of the ideological role of 'desire' as well as the ways in which meanings are attached to objects.

Question 4

Work on Spaces and Places was a longstanding strength of A2 work in the predecessor specification so it was gratifying to see that this tradition has been maintained. Many candidates were well versed in the techniques of reading the environment by using semiotic analysis. Their readings were well supported by reference to a good selection of examples and it is clear that centres are undertaking productive and effective case study work in this area.

The best answers, of course, focused strongly on 'power relations in society'. Usually, this meant consideration of power at a macro level: ways in which corporate power, class inequality or patriarchal values are manifested in the design and organisation of places and spaces, for example. Interestingly, there were some instances of answers that also dealt with the micro politics of power and how these are reflected in the shaping of space in our familiar domestic environments. Well informed candidates moved between such illustrious examples as the Chrysler building, the Houses of Parliament or Canterbury cathedral and more prosaic examples of the vernacular: my house, my high street, the local skate park.

Answers restricted to Level 2 (there were very few in Level 1) often ignored the focus of the question on power and simply wrote out their case studies with a strong emphasis on description rather than analysis. This was particularly disappointing in cases where the chosen case study, a shopping complex, perhaps or a retail chain such as McDonald's were so eminently suitable for critical examination from the point of view of power.

Question 5

Examiners were most impressed that a newly introduced area for A2 study should prove so popular and yield answers of such quality. There are many equally valid ways of dealing with Fictions as a cultural site so it was gratifying to see so much diversity represented not only across the candidature as a whole but also within the responses of individual candidates. The highly eclectic source material ranged widely in terms of media, genre, format and context: from bedtime stories to blockbuster films, from pop lyrics to gothic horror and from Aesop's fables to Jacqueline Wilson. It seems that teachers have really relished the opportunity to work closely with fictional texts and their enthusiasm has clearly been taken up by their students.

Not surprisingly, given their prominence in the literature on narrative, fairy stories were widely and successfully used to tackle the focus on cultural values and beliefs. However, many less obvious examples were also used and it was interesting to see a few responses exploring the narratives of everyday life and ways in which fictional structures are integrated into our lived experiences. Similarly, a number of good answers considered the mode of delivery of stories alongside an analysis of content, for example in discussions of the ways in which nursery rhymes or bedtime stories are told to children.

Answers in the range upper Level 2 to mid Level 3 tended to use relevant examples but to restrict their discussion to issues of representation (for example, gender stereotyping in fairy tales). Better answers were able to supplement this kind of material with further examination of narrative processes, structures and/or discursive modes as described above.
A few answers simply re-told the story of the fictions that had been studied, with only implicit reference to their cultural significance.

Question 6

Although a popular option, the responses to Question 6 were not, overall, quite as impressive as those to the Fictions question. There were still some excellent answers some of which achieved full marks but marks below the middle of Level 2 were also quite common. Answers in the latter category struggled to link their chosen case studies in any way convincingly or systematically to identity. Although we would strongly encourage a personal flavour to exam answers in COMM3, lists of 'things that I own or would like own' followed by the assertion that said things are, therefore, 'important to my identity' show little recognition of the implications of the question or the cultural site.

Better answers dwelt on the significance of advertising and the construction of identity and it was good to see acknowledgement of a wide selection of contributors to the debate including Vance Packard, Herbert Marcuse, Judith Williamson, Thorstein Veblen, Edward Bernays and Mark Paterson, amongst many others. This is not to say that any answer was improved simply by a roll call of names; in this context the ideas are always more important than their originators. However, it is important that candidates communicate a sense that they have studied at least one cultural site extensively and in depth. After all, the marks available for this one question constitute a quarter of all the marks available in A2.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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