General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2011

Communication and Culture   COMM1

(Specification 2625)

Unit 1: Understanding Communication and Culture

Report on the Examination

"In time of difficulties, we must not lose sight of our achievements."
Mao Tse-Tung

General

And so we begin again to reflect on another year and what was a short time ago both 'brand new' and 'a step in the dark' seems strangely (and comfortingly) familiar. Here are exams that teachers and candidates understand and appreciate and coursework units that are providing opportunities for valuable work and responsible marking. Here is a specification consolidating its recent increase in candidates and genuinely offering a step away from the 'teaching to tests' mentality that so blighted the 'Curriculum 2000' initiatives.

This was an important year with both coursework units properly up and running and the real test of a specification with 50% coursework beginning. As in all things we have the Communication and Culture 'family to thank for the fact that things have turned out right: not just moderators and examiners but also all those teachers and their candidates who have made this course so successful. Communication and Culture is genuinely a course made by its various participants and the formal assessments, among other things, are part of an ongoing conversation about what the subject will become.

We are also extending this conversation through the various face-to-face and on-line resources and support we are now able to offer. For the first time this year moderation materials were available on the AQA secure site to support centre marking of coursework. This will become an even more significant part of the process next year. We are also looking to broaden and strengthen the Adviser role so that each centre is allocated an Adviser who will deal with all four units.

COMM1: Understanding Communication and Culture

Overview

"Had we but World enough and Time…" (Andrew Marvell)

Once again candidates (and their teachers) have responded positively to the challenges and constraints that last year's report described as 'four twenty five minute encounters with the salient features of the course: key concepts and essential content' and markers have seen a very good range of engaged and often engaging work.

The fact for example that the mean (average mark) was maintained despite a perhaps slightly more challenging (or at least more surprising) paper speaks volumes for the quality of work that is going on nationwide. Moreover we do seem to be coming through the period of transition in which teachers and candidates have been understandably conservative in their approach and relied heavily on pre-prepared materials. Having seen the specification and its assessments do pretty much what it said it would, there was very much more evidence this year of candidates freed up to establish their own responses to all forms of assessment.

This resulted in very much less of what has aptly been called 'downloaded theory' (largely unassimilated chunks) and a little less 'A2 in AS' theory, which, as we have repeatedly pointed out rarely helps. What was maintained, if not strengthened was that set of bullet point commendations I issued last summer:

- There is some exemplary and remarkable work out there where there is 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 is also lots 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
- There are even fewer who fail to complete the paper. Given time limits, an amazing number of candidates are able to write dense, three-sided academic essays reminiscent of the old A level 45 minute essay
- Markers 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). Again there was much to admire and enjoy.

Both exams in Communication and Culture seek a productive balance between a predictability that supports imaginative and exploratory teaching and a flexibility that greatly reduces the temptation to over prepare intensively for the test. This negotiation was a feature of our predecessor specification and will continue to be a key aspect of Communication and Culture assessment.

Here are four very different but identifiable and delineated assessment experiences entitled 'Culture', 'Communication', 'Toolkits' and 'Everyday Life' which are, ,by now, becoming very familiar to teachers. This examination consciously pulled them about a bit, kept them interesting, and the fact that candidates were able to respond to this is the best evidence of all that we have a well-taught and fully functioning specification. My overall impression is aptly summarised by an experienced examiner who wrote:

> My final impression is that this has been a good paper. One very positive aspect of my allocation is that *all* the candidates had a good go at it. There was plenty of evidence of lots of excellent teaching and discussion and the level of technical language and concepts was higher than any other year I have marked.

In the midst of this 'success' it is easy to overlook, or at least to forget that COMM1 is a very demanding test. To get high marks here is to take on four quite different challenges and perform excellently in each of them. All four of these challenges require the candidate to express knowledge and understanding and apply these consistently.
It was suggested by one examiner that "The paper proves itself by the ability to stretch everyone of all abilities" and also "I think this is a difficult paper (my own pupils have communicated this fact to me as well.)".

In a world of 'preferred' and 'non-preferred' lists of subjects and sometimes ill-informed debates about 'academic standards' driven on both sides by dogma and political expediency, it's sometimes worth reminding ourselves that making appropriate demands on all candidates neither results in exclusivity nor prevents the best candidates from doing what they can. As another examiner commented:

"As always through the open ended provocations that this paper it provides allowed the best students to fly and to argue most eloquently about the world they inhabit and in a way that stretches them more than many other AS papers."

Question One: 'Culture'

All question options were equally active, with a slight preference for 1a's promise of exploring identities in a creative way and all delivered the same kind of performance. The focus on sub-cultures was another reminder that this is not the 'High/Popular Culture' question but rather the 'Culture and cultures'. Although the intention of the question was to focus on sub-culture as a context for a discussion of the personal meanings generated by group members, there was also scope for dealing more interpersonally and psychologically with 'groups'.

Thus there was a greater, and largely relevant and justifiable, overlap between the scope of questions one and two since often the 'knowledge' came from the 'communication' compartment. There was nevertheless plenty of room for the full range of responses from the merely descriptive ("Goths wear black") to sophisticated and nuanced discussions of cultural identity. Goffman was used extensively and often skilfully.

While there were some colourful examples and observations on sub-cultural behaviour, on the whole the range of references was remarkably small. It seemed to most markers that the vast majority of candidates saw sub-cultures as 'emos, chavs, Goths and the occasional ted'. As ever, the degree to which candidates focused directly and specifically on their chosen question was a significant differentiating factor.
Here was a good deal of truth in this marker's observation that "often a failure to address the requirements of the chosen part in favour of a generic 'why teenagers join subcultures' or even ' what are subcultures?' and equally that "very few addressed the 'which do you find the most convincing ' aspect of Q1." Some were, perhaps unsurprisingly, not that secure on the differences between 'culture' and 'subculture'.

Question Two: 'Communication'

Question Two produced the most dramatic pattern of choices we have yet experienced in the new format with twice as many people going for 2a) (feedback) as 2b)(self-esteem) and only a small number going for 2c (ideal self). I think this is a vote for feedback rather than evidence that we had offered a non-viable option.

Question Two is the place where candidates most straightforwardly offer a body of knowledge and this was again evident with a whole range of theories and concepts and terms. What perhaps contributed this time to the fact that they were on the whole not quite as good as the Question One responses was an issue, often unrecognised with the question's focus term: 'self concept'. This was frequently used interchangeably with both self-image and self-esteem (self concepts were often described as 'high' and 'low') and this limited the question somewhat since self concept then became something easily changed: "a feather for every wind that blows".

That aside these were competent and sometimes insightful responses. Most of them clearly showed evidence of a course of study though a few 'lay' responses made a little of 'self-confidence' and self and were consequently unable to gain access to the higher mark bands. There was plenty in the way of self-disclosure which made the generic responses ('My friend was told she was fat and then…') seem obvious and pallid: real life as ever is more varied and distinctive. There was also a good deal of philosophising and moralising, much of which evidences the degree to which 'self-help' has entered the collective consciousness: " if you think positively about yourself and don't let anyone get you down you can achieve anything in life.....'..

Question Three: 'Toolkits'

Variation number two arrived with the 'text' for question 3 which was our first departure from the media texts we have thus far used (and used in the previous specification). This is completely in line with what the specification itself promises:

Candidates are supplied with the image of a cultural product or an example of a cultural product which is itself an image or set of images.

The cultural product in question was the enduringly familiar form of the red telephone box.. This was very much a set of questions aware of the novelty effect of the text and, therefore, provided a staged walk through the potential meanings of this design classic. In simple terms part a) looked at the nature of the text (as a picture of something rather than an image used within a text), part b) considered first and second order signification and part c) followed this up by extending the discussion of its signification.

As usual, this section produced extremes of performance. Often it was a candidate's best section or conversely their worst with marked discrepancies in marks in both cases. It is regrettable that a small number of candidates, unfamiliar with the term 'internet image bank', tried to read the image as an internet bank advertisement. Thankfully no great damage was done in these cases. Most centres seem well prepared for the challenges of this section, realising that this is an explicit (one might say academic) test of the techniques and terminologies of critical reading (hence *toolkits)*. Knowledge of and familiarity with the technical terms is essential.

Question Three: Open and closed texts

3a) All answers were accepted as a potential basis for full marks. Some argued that this text, as a 'snap' is clearly open to possibilities of meaning, mundane and dramatic. Many noted the absence of meaning-fixing devices (*anchorage*) incorporated within the text. Others argued for a closed text, that these possibilities were in fact made spurious by the reality of the image as a highly motivated icon whereby the image fixes its own meaning (what else could we take from it but what it is). Equally candidates offered a bit of both for safety's sake or simply because they recognised both cases. A reasonable number confused open and closed and made good cases for the wrong label. We were not unduly punitive in these cases.

3b) The part that most often prevented the highest marks was a certain lack of confidence with the term 'denotation' or at least the expression of this knowledge. Candidates did best when they simply did as they were asked: identify sign, address denotation, address connotation(s) then pick another sign.

3c) It was not an issue here if 'myth' was not tackled explicitly: it is after all a 'useful' rather than 'essential' term. Given this was something of a 'stretch and challenge' question, we opted not to complicate it further by offering a formal definition of 'myth'. Instead this is implicitly included in the task to "explore the meanings of this traditional design in contemporary culture". Most, in one way or another got the prompt from 'traditional' and 'contemporary' and pretty much everyone was able to understand, albeit loosely, that the phone box 'stands' for something (tradition/culture/Britishness).

This proved a context for some really nice active readings, though some were drawn by 'myth' into tales of Robin Hood, King Arthur and thanks to the telephone box, Doctor Who. Others stressed technology and communication: mobile phones cropped up quite a lot. Most said something relevant about tradition, value, heritage, nostalgia etc. Almost every single London candidate thought such phone boxes were a feature peculiar to London and were perplexed by the rural location of the photo!

Question Four: 'Everyday Life'

And last, and by no means least, question 4 and yet another delightful surprise: a chance to defend Communication & Culture against the vilest charges of our educational opponents. And they did for the most part, though the small number of mavericks who supported the Mail received no mark deductions for doing so. Some replied directly in 'Dear Daily Mail' epistles, some wrote almost legalistic defence speeches which cross-examined the Mail's evidence, while many simply told us what a jolly good course this is. The range was genuinely staggering in mode as well as content: they were personal, passionate, mawkish, forensic, rhetorical, polemical, aggressive, celebratory, confessional and generally pretty good: this was the highest average mark for a Question 4 so far and we had fewest opt outs.

Many admitted that the subject was harder than they'd thought and referenced lots of theory that they'd not necessarily referenced in their other answers. They also compared it favourably to other more traditional subjects they were doing (usually seeing C&C as more demanding than, for example, English). Others explored the usefulness of the subject compared to others (especially History). Some bright sparks referred back to question 2 and accused AQA of using this question as a way of gaining free customer feedback, which , given students' fear of losing marks , would inevitably be positive so boosting AQA/Communication &Culture's self esteem: we were simply fishing for compliments!

There was no great sense that candidates knew *The Daily Mail,* though it was properly taken to task especially for insufficient preparation. One examiner rued this lack of a context in these terms:

> Only a minority of candidates identified that the *Daily Mail i*s a tabloid newspaper with a right wing political bias and a "middle England" agenda to champion "traditional" educational values. Given that many candidates are defending the subject because it gives them a broad understanding of culture - this lack of general knowledge works against them somewhat (still it has led me to design a good lesson on newspaper agendas).

This was clearly an enjoyable task to mark but it was also a seriously effective question which provoked intelligent and effective responses. In response to the energetic defences of Communication & Culture one examiner wrote, "If only they knew, I feel Communication & Culture has actually helped me become a better teacher". Candidates seemed well-equipped to deal with the relatively large amount of text. Certainly there was a window into the status of the subject in the minds and eyes of both students and interested others (from friends and family to The Russell Group). One candidate pointed out that his Head of Sixth Form had told him it was a 'doss' subject but good for UCAS points. Several candidates recounted tales of the 'disappointment' communicated by family members upon learning of their choice of A Level subject.

Proof though that running this gauntlet of shame may be worthwhile was provided by an experienced examiner who wrote:

> The final centre I marked provided some excellent Q4s - one candidate using the "Skateboarding ... Polo" quote as a way of spring-boarding into a very eloquent and high level discussion about class, the economy and culture - proof (if proof were needed) that Comms equips pupils with some pretty advanced concepts for engaging with the world.

May it always remain so.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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

UMS conversion calculator www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion