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# Examiners' Report/ Lead Examiner Feedback

January 2018

BTEC Level 3 Nationals in Art and Design

Unit 2: Critical and Contextual Studies in

Art and Design

(31828H)



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March 2018

Publications Code 31828H\_1801\_ER

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### What is a grade boundary?

A grade boundary is where we set the level of achievement required to obtain a certain grade for the externally assessed unit. We set grade boundaries for each grade (Distinction, Merit, Pass and Near Pass). The grade awarded for each unit contributes proportionately to the overall qualification grade and each unit should always be viewed in the context of its impact on the whole qualification.

### Setting grade boundaries

When we set grade boundaries, we look at the performance of every learner who took the assessment. When we can see the full picture of performance, our experts are then able to decide where best to place the grade boundaries – this means that they decide what the lowest possible mark should be for a particular grade.

When our experts set the grade boundaries, they make sure that learners receive grades which reflect their ability. Awarding grade boundaries is conducted to ensure learners achieve the grade they deserve to achieve, irrespective of variation in the external assessment.

### Variations in external assessments

Each test we set asks different questions and may assess different parts of the unit content outlined in the specification. It would be unfair to learners if we set the same grade boundaries for each test, because then it would not take into account that a test might be slightly easier or more difficult than any other.

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### Unit 2: Critical and Contextual Studies in Art and Design (31828H)

Grade	Unclassified	Near Pass	Pass	Merit	Distinction
Boundary Mark	0	9	18	30	43

## Introduction

This Lead Examiner report is written to help you understand how learners performed this year and to support future delivery. It should be considered in conjunction with the corresponding set task and marking grid.

This was the second year that this externally assessed unit was made available for delivery as part of the new NQF BTEC Art and Design Level 3. This was the first availability for learners to sit the paper in January having been first introduced in June 2017. From now on Unit 2 will be available each January and June.

## Introduction to the Overall Performance of the Unit

There were some considered and thoughtful submissions in response to the January 2018 paper with learners really engaging with both the theme and the art and design practitioners. There was a heavy bias among learners towards Kara Walker's work with only a handful of learners choosing to respond to the chosen piece of work by James Turrell. The work of James Turrell may have appeared more challenging for learners to write about, with the abstract concept of light and space being more difficult to connect with. Kara Walker however provided plenty of easily accessible and layered references to racism, slavery and sexual oppression that learners readily understood, could connect with as relevant topics, and clearly wanted to write about.

A wide range of responses were seen with all mark bands accessed across all four assessment outcomes. Learners who produced weaker responses were poorly prepared and may not have been fully ready to sit the paper. It may be that some learners were entered in January after only one term at Level 3, and as such did not yet have the required level of maturity to really delve into the theme and work as posed by the paper. Alternatively, these learners may have been entered in January as practice in readiness for the 1806 paper. Centres are reminded about the one opportunity learners have to resit and therefore to enter learners with care. Entering learners too early on in the first year of a two year programme means they may not be as well prepared as they would be with a later entry. These are important considerations for a centre to bear in mind. Nevertheless, it was very pleasing to see some learners really engaging with the theme and the artists, producing pieces of authoritative writing with independent and fully justified reasoning included.

Artists in this paper are carefully chosen to ensure that they are internationally recognised and there is accessible research material widely available. The theme of "Monumental" was considered relevant and accessible, and was well received by centres. A diverse range of art and design specialisms were seen in the work selected by learners and those working at the higher end had clearly researched extensively in relation to their chosen artists. Many centres submitted learner work where each learner had made a unique choice of second artists and

this was a strong indication of independent work taking place. This is excellent practice and very encouraging to see. Generally, it was found that this unit was prepared for. Photography, installation, sculpture and painting were popular choices and well represented in the work chosen by the learners. There was also evidence of consideration of graphics, architecture, textiles and fashion and product design represented. This indicated that the paper was widely accessible to learners working across a range of specialisms.

Some learners had perhaps chosen their favourite or a familiar practitioner to write about and then tried to justify the decision, and connect to the theme using basic and purely descriptive statements. This indicated that the theme itself had not been fully explored. Some learners struggled to convincingly connect their chosen artist to the theme, resulting in rather clumsy writing. Research time may not always be as well utilised as it could be. It is recommended that learners spend up to 20 hours to complete research and preparatory work. Centre should ensure that learners know how to plan and carry out effective research ahead of taking this unit.

Learners can take up to four A4 sides of notes with them into the supervised assessment period in order to respond to the set task. These notes must be written in bullet form and include no full sentences or extended essays. Higher ability or better prepared learners then crafted well written responses. They made good use of notes from articles, pulling together an engaging and fluent piece of writing. Learners who were less prepared or of lower ability, struggled to produce a well-constructed piece of writing. It is here that learners would benefit from further support ahead of the preparatory period in learning how to build up a substantial piece of writing from bullet point notes.

Activity 2, the email, remains the weaker part of the submission. Often learners fail to add anything new, often repeating statements or information already provided in Activity 1. Where learners are simply regurgitating information already stated, they fail to evidence a depth of understanding and critical discrimination and judgement. The formulation of independent judgements is key to achievement in Activity 2. Learners need to have the confidence to clearly state which of the practitioners is their selected artist and why.

Centres are to be commended though in supporting learners to make independent and personal choices of their chosen practitioner as this has encouraged individual and convincing writing to emerge from learners who are perhaps still new to this process. Overall, much of the work seen for the January entry for Unit 2 was of a pleasing standard and evidence real engagement with the theme and chosen artists.

# Task

## **AO1: Be able to apply an effective investigation process to inform understanding of creative practitioners**

Learners must carry out effective and well directed research into two creative practitioners and the theme of the paper. Evidence of effective research was not only seen in the bibliography, but also evident in how well that knowledge travelled through and informed the learner's submission. The process of research is a journey and learners should initially research a large range of sources and then make careful edits as to what is relevant and what can be discarded. The ability to select and edit information is very important due to the constraints given by the word counts.

Learners need to ensure that their additional practitioner chosen to investigate is an appropriate selection which allows them sufficient breadth and depth of coverage. They must ensure their chosen artist has an established reputation and presence, and they are not too obscure, otherwise this will limit their ability to research and find relevant information.

Some learners are still unable to carry out an effective investigation and are not understanding the purpose of research. Indeed the number of factual inaccuracies contained in submissions was disappointing. This included obviously wrong information about places, dates, materials and actions. These had likely come about through weak research leading to inaccurate statements and assumptions being made by the learner. The lack of consistency in recording data and facts accurately meant that it was sometimes difficult for learners to sit firmly in a mark band as there was a resulting lack of confidence in the submission, despite some eloquence in the writing. This is not acceptable at this level of qualification and learners must ensure that their research sources are reliable. It would make sense to double check information and not always accept the first finding as accurate. This is particularly relevant when using the internet. Despite serious factual errors, the images and artists were accurately recorded.

Higher achieving learners submitted lengthy bibliographies showing extensive and relevant sources of information about the artists and the theme. Learners carried out interesting and varied research predominantly using websites, but research was also carried out using books, film and TV. Some learners had personally seen, visited or experienced a piece of work by their chosen practitioner and this produced enthusiastic and sometimes emotional responses from the learners. This expansion of response and direct engagement with the work was very pleasing to see. Weaker learners tended to simply rewrite obvious articles from limited websites. It is not a requirement for a learner to see work first hand but learners should be accessing a wide range of research material from different sources to enable a full engagement in the research process. Strengths are seen where a learner has done this and is therefore more able to develop an independent line of enquiry.

A couple of centres had omitted to include images, and the absence of any images meant that additional visual checks needed to be made by examiners in relation to the practitioner chosen by the artist. It is hoped that this will be addressed in future; all submissions must be accompanied by at least two images.

The theme itself, Monumental was perhaps not always fully investigated or maybe the significance was not fully understood or explored. This restricted the marks available to some learners. This became clear in Activity 2 where those learners who had not been able to really connect their research to the theme struggled to fully respond to the task. Learners who had delved deeper into the meaning and significance through their research and analysis were able to demonstrate a more synthesised response. The theme Monumental clearly gave learners the opportunity to access a wide range of artists and designers. The meaning could be interpreted and reasons justified depending on the learner's emerging or established point of view.

Bibliographies are being recorded with increasing relevance. Some centres had encouraged learners to cite in text references and to identify how a source had been used, providing excellent evidence of an effective investigation. Quotes were attributed in the main, although sometimes there should be a more considered editing of the use of direct quotes. It is not useful to include whole paragraphs of attributed speech where little independent expansion is provided by the learner. There is simply not a sufficient word count to sacrifice original writing for large quotes. In addition, centres are reminded that only bullet notes are permitted into the supervised assessment period, so quotes should be brief at best.

Mostly the writing had a consistent and logical structure. Some learners responded with a style of writing that reflected the editorial nature of the task. Whilst this was not essential it was a sign that learners had really engaged with the vocational nature of the task rather than simply produce a piece of writing with no audience in mind. Some had gone further still and also considered layout and purposeful placement of images. Again, this was not essential but very pleasing to see that the whole paper had been considered in terms of the set task being taken on board. The development of this vocational skill is very encouraging to see in a visual arts qualification.

## **AO2: Demonstrate the ability to visually analyse the work of creative practitioners**

There was a large range of published material available to learners about both artists included in the paper. Learners overwhelmingly opted to write about Kara Walker, perhaps finding the material straightforward to access and having contemporary significance to many. The abstract values of James Turrell's work may have been more challenging for learners to access and this work was mostly analysed well by higher ability learners. The challenge was for learners to access readily available information and to go beyond simply reproducing it, by creating an original and thoughtful response. This was particularly evident again in the choice of the second practitioner. It was vital that the learner's choice of practitioner also linked well with the theme. Learners who chose obscure practitioners were often limited in their research, but could partially compensate by creating original lines of enquiry. However, this

was harder for learners to reference with valid evidence and often they ran out of things to say, as research opportunities were obscure and limited.

Learners who chose practitioners with who they were perhaps already familiar tended towards a simplistic response and relied upon single source information or memory. They were less able to connect the work to the theme and the work was much less convincing. Higher achieving learners who had effectively investigated the theme Monumental also made connections that brought another level of depth to their writing. They could convincingly explain how the theme was evident in both visual analysis and contextual factors influencing their chosen practitioner. It is essential that the learners retain a focus on the theme throughout this paper when considering the work of both practitioners.

There was a real sense of emerging confidence in learners within some of the visual analysis, clearly building on prior learning. Learners ready for this level of study clearly showing development and progression from learning that had taken place at level 2. In some cases there was less consolidation of knowledge into a sophisticated body of writing with learners perhaps more tentatively exploring visual analysis. Such learners may have benefited from further preparation and a later entry to this unit. Some responses were formulaic with learners working through the formal elements as a template approach to building a body of writing. Where visual deconstruction was weaker, it contained a number of instances of unsupported personal opinion instead of insightful and reasoned commentary. These learners perhaps not ready to reach their full potential and unable to present a fluid piece of writing. Learners who did display authority and ownership of their commentaries imparted a higher level of understanding and made pertinent connections between subject matter and meaning.

### **AO3: Demonstrate understanding of how contextual factors influence creative practitioners work**

Learners wrote at length about Kara Walker. They seemed genuinely interested and inspired, with the selected work providing many layers and accessible references. Although fewer learners chose to investigate James Turrell they also found plenty to inform their writing and responded well. Learners showed a greater understanding of the influence and relevance of social, familial, cultural and political events and are beginning to make connections with these in relation to the selected pieces of work. Perhaps less convincing was how the learners wrote about their chosen artist. It is important for centres to understand that this is a critical choice for the learner to make. Often the writing would be sectioned, with the first part being based on either Kara Walker or James Turrell and the second part on the learner's chosen practitioner. The first part was often found to be much longer and more detailed than the part about the learner's chosen practitioner. Learners should aim to produce a balanced piece of writing with equal focus to access higher marks. While most learners were able to document James Turrell's biographical data and the data surrounding the set piece, the response to the concepts behind the work was overall less successful with some substituting technical information for visual analysis.



There was less reference documented considering the work of other practitioners who may have influenced the chosen practitioners. This consideration was only evident in the work of some high achieving learners. It is important for learners to recognise that artists and designers do not work in isolation and can gain influence from many sources, including the contemporary, digital, traditional and/or historical work of other practitioners. Weaker or less focused research therefore gave a basic response. The tendency was seen here for the learner to write about a practitioner in isolation without any consideration given to contextual factors, including the work of other artists and designers, influencing the practitioner's creative work.

Learners must undertake research into a broad range of contextual factors that could influence a creative practitioner and then select the ones that are most pertinent. If they can also make connections to the theme, considering contextual factors then this will make for a commanding piece of writing that also engages with the task.

#### **AO4: Communicate independent judgements demonstrating understanding of the work of creative practitioners**

For activity 2, learners must write convincingly about their findings. This is an opportunity for a succinct summary to be produced about both creative practitioners. It should not be a repeat of information already stated in activity 1, but a concise summary from which independent judgements are formed. The email submission for activity 2 frequently consisted of large chunks of the text written for Activity 1. The learners need to write convincingly and persuasively about the selection of one practitioner over another. This seemed to challenge some learners. Other learners really got to grips with this task and managed to write convincingly in fewer words, about how their practitioner of choice would be a convincing feature piece. These learners included a brief summary of both practitioners, comparing and contrasting different approaches, whilst keeping a focus on the fact that the artwork itself should be visually strong enough to be placed on a front cover. The vocational setting was also kept in mind and some learners wrote convincingly about how a publisher could expect an increase in sales through making the recommended choice. These learners also wrote appropriately for an email communication and maintained a focus on the set task requirements.

Nevertheless, this activity was one where learner's generally struggled, even if they had done well in activity 1. Some learners had not understood what was required and described instead what they had been doing, using the email as a vehicle for an overly chatty communication. A number of learners failed to make a decision at all and were unable to provide any evidence of justification. Other learners struggled to go beyond saying that they had made a choice based on personal preference, because they 'liked this one the best'. These learners missed an opportunity to show that they could justify a decision. Some learners only mentioned one artist, others did not make full use of the word count available. Learners must make sure that they identify one practitioner that best fits the set task and explain why. The writing must be balanced and not report on one practitioner only.

It is essential that the learner does refer back to the set task and responds to all the points that they will be assessed on. In the paper it clearly states that learners will be assessed on their ability to synthesise the visual analysis and contextual factors to form judgements; compare the practitioners and their work linked to the theme 'Monumental' and to justify their arguments with relevant evidence. Where learners have done this they responded very convincingly and were able to justify their decisions with a clear audit of evidence.

## Summary

There was a mixed range of ability and preparation shown in the submissions for this first January series of Unit 2. Learners who were ready for this level of study, showed development and progression from learning that had taken place at level 2. There were a few number of submissions from learners where it was clear they would have benefited from a longer period of teaching ahead of being entered for this unit. This may allow them to respond more convincingly and with more confidence. Higher achieving learners, including those who had prepared well for the set task were able to bring authority to their writing. There was a real disparity in the way that the bibliography was documented. Some learners identified where and how their research had been useful to them and others barely listed more than three references.

Centres will see a more focused response from their learners if they can upskill them with research techniques and to help them fully understand the nature of the task itself. Learners need to not only write with authority about their chosen practitioners, but to also make convincing links and references to the theme. This is vital in meeting the requirements of the task. An important point arising from this paper is that facts and data must be checked for accuracy. Learners must not assume the first thing they read is correct and must ensure that if they are to include a fact they must check the validity of the information. Failure to do this undermines the integrity of the entire submission. Lower ability learners were at best writing up their research without questioning it. They simply rephrased obvious information but then struggled to demonstrate their own understanding regarding the work of the chosen practitioners or the theme.

The stronger responses came from learners who had followed the instructions in the paper and been able to fully process their research findings. These learners have developed and articulated complex ideas and made original and interesting comparisons and arguments. An effective investigation is key to success with this paper but also the ability to rebuild notes, ideas and findings into a fluid piece of intelligent and accurate writing.

