

A-level

# Communication and Culture

Unit 4 Communication and Culture in Practice: Portfolio  
Report on the Examination

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## COMM4

### General

This appears to have been the year that the specification was consolidated with increasingly assured contributions from students and moderators alike. Centres have approached the Topics and Themes with diligence and creativity evidenced by the wide range of original ideas discussed with energy and commitment and a solid focus on cultural significance while employing an interesting and varied range of references and sources.

Students appear to have found the Key Concepts and perspectives provide a useful contextualisation of their thoughts while, in both sections of the coursework, finding a balance between both the objective and academic, the personal and creative and the understanding and communication of important concepts. What is reassuring and exciting is to read thoughtful, well-focused, sharply observant readings of developed examples which are then reflected upon to create real insights into the ways in which our culture makes meanings.

The pressure on teachers and students is considerable. There are concerns about some centres awarding marks leniently, in particular at the higher ends of the assessment where good Level 3 work was being awarded Level 4 routinely. Where we adjust marks it is to correct these trends and certainly not to punish centres or their students. We are looking year on year to establish and maintain a dialogue with teachers, which is why we believe in the importance of good quality feedback (please seek out your feedback form).

Online Standardisation materials, available on the e-AQA site, have provided centres with models of what constitutes work at each of the levels (and their sub-divisions). It may be that more use can be made of these when justifying your own marking decisions although, as ever, it is the ‘best-fit’, more ‘holistic’, model of assessment that is the order of the day. We are simply trying to supply more intelligent tools. This is an attempt to provide clarity in what is after all a ‘standard’, a set of benchmarks. The online standardisation materials offer a guide as to what constitutes ‘competent’, ‘good’, ‘very good’ and ‘excellent’ work. It is reassuring to note how many centres have used those bench-marks to assess their own students’ work in the light of the wider perspective, a ‘bounty’ only previously enjoyed by moderators!

The materials are not intended to be overly prescriptive in what students can offer; after all, each year delivers a more varied range of written and audio-visual responses. Even the range of what is produced under the simple title of ‘Case Study’ is extremely broad. We’d like to develop the ‘conversations’ that go on around marking so as to produce a possibly more fluid form of assessment, and possibly also one that adapts itself to markers’ needs given the range of work that is produced each year. Smaller centres may, and do, find the exemplars helpful in guiding their judgements, given the limited range of material presented to them each year. Discretion may occasionally be the ‘better part of valour’, but it is also a tool which centres can use given the personal nature of the engagement with our students and their work. Teachers seek to contribute to the future of their students’ fulfilment, and this specification offers students and teachers the opportunities to develop their skills and competencies, their conceptual awareness and intellectual rigour in ways which they will only appreciate later, perhaps, whether in Higher Education or in the public and private sectors of our economy. The close reading of a range of texts (literal and metaphorical), reflections and explorations of the contested and unstable meanings of those texts in the shifting cultures we inhabit, and a range of potential discourses through which to articulate those meanings – all this is at the heart of what we do. There are few enough opportunities to enhance the personal and the objective as dialogues and conversations.

## Case Studies

A large number of fascinating explorations of cultural ideas have again emerged from that 2000 word reading called a ‘Case Study’. It seems to be one area where moderators can say they really learned something! The four topics and the 24 themes attracted students sufficiently well so that they almost all found something of interest and even passion, and which helped their growth intellectually and academically. The 2000 word ‘limit’ appears to be sufficient to be sharply focused without being long-winded, and yet it clearly demands a substantial input from students and teachers alike. Like the Apollo spacecraft, however, we still ‘have a problem’: students take the Theme as being the ‘title’ of the piece, from which they can only generate a generalised discussion of ideas, rather than attempt some kind of close reading of a cultural text or two, alongside which they need to contextualise the different competing arguments with reference to selective elements of the perspectives and key concepts. Given the Assessment Objectives for Level 4, it is difficult to see how simply discursive work can attain the higher levels of marks. It also happens that work which simply concentrates on deconstructing texts, such as books or films, or buildings, or urban spaces or community events, can’t reach Level 4, without some broader purpose (reflections on the culture we live in) or some other sense of contextualising parameters which helps us understand what it all ‘means’.

There is no doubt that the best work reaches a level that an undergraduate might be proud of, with a specialist register, the observant application of understanding, and which is substantially referenced and sourced beyond Wikipedia and citation sites, or teacher PowerPoints on Marcuse. It is obviously easier for smaller centres to find the time in or out of sessions to work individually with students discussing what they want to say, and offering some useful guidance as to ideas and arguments that might be pursued, and some reading to support their analysis.

## Creative Work

The technical and conceptual competencies displayed by students in the Creative work seems to have reached a new peak! There are so many different kinds of media in use, and such a wide range of resources being trawled through from which pertinent and resonant images and sounds are being selectively harnessed into some fascinating audio-visual constructions. In previous years there developed a set of unspoken conventions as to what Creative work might be, and the same or similar patterns of audio-visual montages became a kind of norm. They are still there – the models by which this kind of discourse generates its own history, but they are also being developed with increasing sophistication, purpose and confidence. ‘Even’ PowerPoints are becoming a flexible tool through which students are saying significant things in eye- and ear-catching ways!

There is still felt to be some kind of compulsion to include ‘theory’ in the Creative piece, which is absolutely not the case; in fact given the putative audience of A2 Communication and Culture students, even they would scarcely sit through chunks of text (visual or voiced-over) interspersed with pictures of Marx, Engels and co. Sometimes, it is relevant and interesting, but it needn’t be ‘rewarded’ in any sense – there are no tariffs on ‘theory’!

There is still a problem over length of Creatives but most centres now understand that 6 minutes is plenty of time to deliver ideas which may take a little longer to think about – to ‘consume’. And how editing has progressed over the last 4 years! An astonishing range of clips and extracts are garnered and snipped to size to provide the kind of variety which is both entertaining and

purposeful, which make a real contribution to the delivery of concepts within a concentrated time-span.

Online sites are still a rather risk-heavy way of making material available, although the range of choices offered by pre-prepared websites has grown exponentially, and certainly offer a variety of ways of creating, and reading, Creative work. They also have their limitations, which needs recognising. Not all links work, moderators report, and the reliable formats offered can also be inhibitors of creativity. Productions do sometimes fall into another kind of routinised, formulaic response.

Another feature of Creatives which is developing fast is the personal voice-over or face to camera delivery which requires some nerve and daring on the part of the creator. However 'personal' they feel to the self-conscious maker of Creative work, their impact is so valuable. It would be good to develop that personal response beyond the 'reading' of quasi-essays as voice-overs. The use of interviews is usually interesting with more time and thought being given to the *mis-en-scène* of those documentary-style pieces, and, as ever, students' use of sound-tracks was an art-form in itself! There is more pointed commentary in the array of songs used than in most of the read-out scripts, including judicious ironies and heart-melting impact at times! Hopefully our guidelines on the Creative published on the AQA website, earlier in the year will play its part too.

## **The Topics**

### **Consumer**

An abiding favourite among students this topic still engages with students' subjectivity in fascinating ways. Brands, and not just Apple and Disney, engage them and exert a significant force in their economic existence as well as their social and cultural existence. The Frankfurt school usually offers a direct opposition here, but students know that every day they have to wrestle with greater complexities than Adorno and co seem to offer and that struggle is articulated perceptively in Case Studies.

The overlapping with previous topics such as 'celebrity' is pretty evident in some cases, but then there are also useful overlaps with 'Objects of Desire' and 'Fictions' which is one of the ways in which the overall integrity of the A2 course expresses itself.

### **Festival**

Fewer students elected for this topic, and those that did, tended to use their experience of music festivals such as Glastonbury, or the V Festival, and one or two smaller, more local, more genre-focused festivals. The arguments within these case studies frequently explore the increasing commercialisation of festivals, with some examination of the codes and conventions, through which, or despite of which, a good time is invariably had by all, as they say. By way of comparison, students invariably invoke the counter-cultural past – a rather mythologised image of the 'good old days', but there were interesting reflections of changing political contexts of festivals which made significant points.

### **On the Streets**

There was a smaller response here in terms of numbers, but a very wide range of ideas and cultural meanings were developed – a topic providing a plethora of opportunities with which to

explore the margins of the world we inhabit. Clearly, students working on ‘Places and Spaces’ found much to support their enquiries.

This topic also generated some excellent Creative work on some the ways in which cultural activities that originated on the streets have become absorbed into mainstream culture.

### **Otherness**

This new topic evidently drew the largest number of students, perhaps surprisingly, given that, at first sight, the topic can appear to quite opaque; and perhaps it was the fact that as an idea, it needs some exegesis, that makes it attractive in the potential that it carries to examine a range of ideas that aren’t, at first, straightforward.

Some of the best case studies offered fascinating insights into ideas of ethnicity and gender, and their changing roles in our culture, and a good number employed media texts (film and television particularly) through which to argue ideas and concepts. Quite a number of students exercised their critical skills in de-constructing texts in relation to ‘otherness’, but few returned to offer insights into how ‘otherness’ works conceptually, psychologically or politically, say, in a culture.

## **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.

## **Converting Marks into UMS marks**

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

**UMS conversion calculator** [www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion](http://www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion)