The long-term unemployed

An investigation into their reasons for non-participation in adult basic education

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Abstract

There is evidence from research completed by the Department for Education & Skills (DfES, 2003a; 2003b; 2006) that poor literacy, language and numeracy skills (LLN) have adverse effects on the employment prospects of individuals. The studies conclude that people with good literacy and numeracy skills tend to have a better chance of being in work than the 20% of the working age population who lack these skills (Moser, 1999). Leitch (2006) reports that the overall benefit to society of improving these skills among adults without formal qualifications will in turn lead to an increase in their employment levels, economic prosperity, and social justice.

This paper draws together findings from research undertaken by the author of long-term unemployed adults who lack a first level 2 formal qualification (defined as 5 GCSE’S A*-C grade or equivalent) The research approach used for this study was essentially a face-to-face, longitudinal, qualitative survey using semi-structured interviews and observation, which were supported by data collected via a questionnaire.

The research examined the barriers these unemployed adults face before starting adult LLN courses, which have been developed to help them into sustainable employment. The many reasons put forward for non-participation in a learning activity suggest that there is a need to overcome or remove barriers and obstacles before individuals can be engaged. A conceptual framework of motivational theory was utilised to investigate and lend support to this thinking (Maslow, 1970).

An important factor identified during this research was that the removal of barriers alone does not necessarily motivate an individual with low LLN skills to address this issue (Cross, 1981; Calder 1993). Indeed the LLN provision for unemployed adults often reinforces the individual’s notion of past failures, with many potential learners being unwilling to consider the possibility of repeating a previous lack of success (McGivney, 1993). Research findings also indicated that many people do not recognise, or have unrealistic estimates of their LLN ability.

Therefore, there is an argument against the assumption that removal of these barriers will, in all cases, lead to an individual being motivated to attend LLN funded learning provision. For many, motivation to engage must also include the use of high quality information, advice and guidance (IAG) to create in the individual a positive expectation of success, and an identification of some congruence between their perception of themselves, and the nature of the education programme or learning environment.

Introduction
There has been considerable research completed into the theory of human motivation over many years and it continues to be the subject of much debate. Early theories put forward suggest that human behaviour is the outcome of inborn tendencies (Maslow; 1954), these have been expanded and developed by researchers such as, Kidd (1978), Knowles (1980), Cross (1981), Courtney (1991) and Hargreaves (1998), who focused primarily on how human behaviour, linked to the drive and desire to satisfy personal needs, could be harnessed in order to engage adults in an educational activity. Contrastingly, the work of Davenport & Davenport (1985), Calder (1993) Hanson (1996) and McGivney (1993) has raised issues of how the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of an individual are not inborn as suggested by Maslow, but are instead affected or modified by their membership of a particular family or social group.

The focus on adult education and training from central government now has the aim of widening, not just increasing participation in learning and involves the removal of barriers and obstacles that have long been associated with the groups under-represented in adult education and training (see, for example, McGivney, 1999; DfES, 2003a; 2003b; 2006; Leitch, 2006). Such analysis has focused on in depth investigations into the key features of non-participants, indicating characteristics distinguishing non-participants from participating post compulsory learners as educational background, socio-economic group and age.

The conclusions from this work indicate that those with least initial schooling are more likely to be non-participants and the lower the social group or class, the lower the participation rate, also, older people are less likely to be involved. A common finding in research of adults with low or no qualifications is that non-participants have little or no knowledge of the educational opportunities available and what these opportunities can provide for them (Tusting & Barton, 2003). This has drawn attention to a need: when looking at barriers to participation: to differentiate between situational, institutional and dispositional factors. These perceived key barriers to learning were summarised by McGivney as:

- **Situational**: time available for attendance, cost of courses, and lack of transport.
- **Institutional**: a system unresponsive to the needs of adult learners in terms of teaching/learning strategies, timetabling and admissions to courses; also a lack of adequate information and publicity about learning opportunities.
- **Dispositional**: problems of attitude, negative perceptions of learning, expectations and motivations linked to the key features of non-participant individuals and groups

McGivney (1993: 19-22)

**Theoretic Framework**

For many individuals, participation in an educational activity may depend on the extent to which they have been able to meet a range of primary and secondary needs combined with the influence of positive and negative forces (Miller 1967). This suggests for example, that as basic primary needs are met, or as one economic and social position ‘improves’, higher needs are activated, leading to a change in the balance between negative and positive forces. Where there is a shift to a more positive force then as a result people are more prepared to take part in educational activities. Therefore fulfilment of one’s primary and secondary needs often implies that one is in
good social and economic standing, which leaves the individual with enough economic resources and time to engage in other activities. Individuals who meet these requirements are those most likely to participate. Individuals might not participate in these activities, because they want to know and understand, but because everybody else in their group partakes in such activities and they want to conform to their group norms (McGivney 1993: 25). Their learning needs are motivated by a need to belong, a more primary or basic need than the need to know and understand linked to personal growth and fulfilment. The application of the theory of human motivation in a different setting exhibits a tension that can produce different interpretations. This is because the basic assumption that people have a potential and desire for growth, which includes an intrinsic drive towards self-fulfilment, was based on results from specific groups that may not have been representative of the population as a whole (Maslow, 1954).

When offering further reasons for individual's motivation, we can use two basic assertions, which are, that people identify with the social and cultural group to which they belong, referred to as the 'normative' reference group or NRG. Secondly people identify with another group, to which they aspire to belong, called the 'comparative' reference group or CRG. NRG, can have a restricting effect on participation depending on the cultural group, but CRG is seen in a more positive light, where people have some perception of missed opportunity and therefore seek out opportunities to advance themselves (McGivney 1993). A number of studies point out that people's environment and group membership creates an orientation towards involvement or lack of involvement in educational projects and programmes and this can be evidenced by whether they fall mainly into the NRG or CRG group. (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982).

An explanation of why socio-economic status, or class can be linked to motivation and participation in adult education, is evidenced by charting positive forces and negative forces and their relative strengths and influence on the individual's propensity to engage in learning (Miller 1967). A key finding from research into motivation to engage in a learning activity is the correlation between the numbers of years spent in school and the likelihood of taking part in education programmes as an adult (Boshier, 1973). The argument centres around those spending longer periods in school; not leaving at the first opportunity but continuing with sixth form education; which, it can be shown will have a greater propensity to continue in further education, as they have a greater perception of what it can provide for them. Further to this there is evidence that people are more likely to engage in educational activities, where there is some congruence between their self perception and the type of educational activity or environment (ibid).

Rubenson (1977) describes education as an achievement-orientated activity, and suggests people will put effort into personal achievement. Rubenson suggested that motivation emerges from two factors; expectancy and valence. Expectancy is described as (a) the expectation of personal success in an educational activity and (b) the expectation that being successful in an activity will have positive consequences. Valence refers to the sum of positive or negative values that people assign to learning activities (Cross 1981: 116). For example, a positive aspect to participation in education is it can lead to promotion and increased earnings, whereas a negative aspect can be more stress at work.

Linked to the factors, put forward to explain participation or non-participation in a learning activity, is the notion of 'life transition' (Bates: 1992) or life changes, which has taken on a much larger role in thinking regarding the take-up of basic or further education. The impact of life changes is seen as supporting the hypothesis that participation in education episodes is frequently linked to these changes in life circumstances. There is however a contradiction between the suggestions of how this response can occur, because life transitions can be debilitating for some, but can constitute a window of opportunity or growth for others. There is evidence that adults may decide to participate
in educational activities following life altering events such as changes in job, the break up of a relationship, having children, bereavement as this is often seen as a means of them effecting change, while others regard these events as negative and do not use them to effect change (Banks et al: 1992)

The theories introduced and described in this paper can be criticised as culturally bound, and there is possibly a need to look in particular at the notion of the self involved, and to what extent does it reflect dominant western views of the individual. Self understanding is bound up with the culture we are part of, and many ideas that western researchers hold as obvious are not shared by all of the world’s cultures. For example in the “me culture” that prevails in western countries, individuals needs take centre stage, whereas in the “we culture” of many non-western countries there is a contradiction, and group welfare supersedes individual needs.

Research Methodology
To address the research question a study was undertaken of long-term unemployed adults, which took place over a period of eighteen months, during which time barriers to adult education for this group were examined, and then linked to models of motivation and finally changes in educational attainment and status by individuals on completion of their Adult Basic Education (ABE). The research consisted of a longitudinal study of an identified group of long-term unemployed people none of whom had obtained a first level 2 qualification, defined by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority as, five GCSE’s at A*-C grade or equivalent.

A survey approach using questionnaires, interviews and observations was chosen for the different phases of this research because it allowed detailed analysis of the topic and afforded the opportunity of obtaining data in the form of opinions, and impressions, from respondents for analysis. The methods previously described were chosen in an attempt to answer the research questions and to understand the present state of the subject at the specific time the data was collected. A considerable amount of data was collected before speculation of its significance, or much idea of what to expect from the research. In contrast, more theoretical methods would have required the collection of empirical data guided largely by the preliminary theoretical exploration of what to expect from the research. Empirical methods in this instance were used mainly in the exploration of the unexplored subject before I became more familiar with the subject under investigation.

The research approach used for this study was essentially a face-to-face, longitudinal, qualitative survey using semi-structured interviews and observation, which were supported by data collected via questionnaires. Interviews were conducted concurrent with the distribution and collection of completed questionnaires during the first part of the survey and the later part of the survey. The main focus of the interviews and observations was to understand the characteristics of the survey participants and to build on the responses to the questionnaires. The focus of the questionnaires was to allow the production of a table of barriers relevant to the research group, which could be used later to increase understanding of the difficulties encountered by the long-term unemployed, who are offered learning provision.

Having completed the first stage of the research, it was possible to analyse the results and to determine the barriers to learning put forward by the respondents. The survey resulted in the completion of thirty-six interviews, ninety-seven questionnaires and included a small number of observations. Of those consenting to be interviewed and completing the questionnaire, twenty-three went on to start learning provision. The results from the Basic Skills Agency, Initial Assessment, (BSIA) for each of these learners, identified their skills levels against national standards and were recorded at the start of learning provision for later comparison on completion of provision.
Findings

Attrition rates were high and only eleven of those starting or 47% went on to complete their course of study. In order to find out what improvement had taken place each individual who completed their course was asked to undertake a further BSIA test consisting of different questions. Results were then compared to those recorded prior to their starting educational provision. The recorded results indicated an increased level of skills for all respondents with most progress being made by those already working at entry level 3 or above.

An approach was made to a number of those who had started provision but left before completing in order to find out why they had left provision early. Three of these agreed to be interviewed and answered questions relating to their reasons for not completing the course of study. These interviews were semi-structured and face-to-face, with no questionnaire being employed to gather further data, therefore decreasing the potential validity and reliability of the research results (Denscombe 2005). However, it was thought to be a worthwhile exercise and some corroboration of the theories, previously discussed for non-participation was found. Through the use of this data gathering method there was an expectation of a less complete, holistic and contextual portrayal of the results (Graham & Skinner 1991), plus the limited number of respondents was also a cause for concern in generalising the results.

The reasons for non-participation are often complex and usually consist of more than one barrier as previously discussed. Indeed, a number of factors, which encompassed both motivation and barriers, were identified while conducting this research, any of which could be used to explain an individual’s rationale with regard to non participation.

The study of non-learners identified a number of barriers, which included situational barriers, noted in the research group by their responses to questioning as, lack of money, housing problems or poor transport links. Further to this, the individuals’ dispositional barriers such as lack of motivation linked to a poor attitude to learning, which was reinforced by negative perceptions of prior learning experience also contributed to the overall negative response.

There is a tension between motivation and barriers, which are closely linked, and the assumption for this is based on an individual’s willingness to change their own circumstances. The removal of barriers can reduce this tension and is a means through which motivation to change improves. There was some support for this argument found within the research group when 16% initially reported travel costs as a significant barrier to starting learning provision. However, when questioned later during the study they reported they had been motivated to pursue learning provision after finding travel costs, course material and course fees would be fully funded, thus removing them as barriers. A further 47% reported barriers due to learning difficulties. Taster days at a provider’s premises were used in order to show that provision was not conducted in an authoritative or controlling environment. Once able to overcome these expected barriers to learning, due to negative perceptions from prior learning episodes and perceived learning difficulties, there was an increase in motivation to start a learning programme.

The cause of most psychological barriers is the fear of knowledge of oneself, of emotions, memories and potentialities of ones destiny. This was evidenced during the research by individuals displaying fear of knowledge and learning, which during questioning could be seen as isomorphic with and parallel to a fear of the outside world and how improvement in educational attainment would lead to a change in their present situation. In some cases it had led, to an avoidance of personal growth, which manifested itself as an increased fear of feeling inadequate or of weakness, in turn leading some to deny their talents, positive impulses, creativeness and potentialities. Humanistic psychology describes this fear of knowledge as usually defensive in the
sense that it is a protection of our own self-esteem, and respect for our self-image linked to a fear of repeating previous poor performance. During the interviews some respondents described this fear of learning as making them feel inferior, weak and sometimes shameful, which had led the individual to deride themselves due to their lack of past achievement. It also became clear there was a perceived inability to learn, and fear of failure on the part of these individuals, should they attempt to change their situation by undertaking a learning programme. This fear of knowledge is used as a protection of the individual's ideal image of themselves. The research group appeared to accomplish this protection by repression or similar defences, which helped them avoid becoming conscious of these potential unpleasant truths such as previous educational underachievement or believed prior failure.

Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs theory was also used as a means through which the research group motivations to participate, or not participate, in the basic skills training process could be explained. An assumption was made from this theory that by removing the lower order barriers to work and training it would allow individuals to develop the self-confidence and self-esteem necessary to progress through learning and into work. These barriers were identified while conducting the research by distractions such as:

- Problems with benefits, which resulted in not having enough money to pay for basics (e.g. food, electricity, rent, travel).
- Housing problems (homelessness, poor living conditions).
- Low confidence and self-esteem, which acted as a barrier to work and training.

The distractions are analogous to Maslow's physiological, safety and esteem needs, and theoretically must be addressed before potential learners can effectively participate in training and employment. A range of barriers were identified from those responding to the questionnaire and during interviews, while more than half the cohort reported multiple barriers. It was found that a lack of basic skills in literacy and numeracy was not felt to be the major barrier that customers faced when trying to obtain work and attend learning provision or training although, when combined with those reporting learning difficulties it was seen as a problem by 47% of the research group. The range of barriers reported by the group was quite diverse with many feeling they were held back by their lack of training, qualifications and experience (54%), basic skills (25%), learning difficulties (22%), lack of work history (33%) and length of time outside the labour market (39%). Others thought their key barriers were health/mental health (48%) and age (34%).

Peer pressure played a profound part in the research group’s prior educational episodes and had a normative or restricting influence on their achievements. The importance of the cultural or social group to which people belong does have a strong determining effect on their achievement levels, and was found to be the case within this research group. There was also evidence of a lack of knowledge of the education and training available to them, which made them unlikely to seek out opportunities for advancement, because there was no aspiration to belong to another group as there was no perception of, ‘missing out’ or ‘being deprived’ (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). Others who were aware of learning opportunities put forward situational, institutional and dispositional barriers as reasons for not taking part (McGivney 1993). The system of assessment and referral used by personal advisers was criticised as unresponsive to learner’s needs and lacking in adequate information and publicity that would lead the non-learner to learning opportunities. Work by Cross (1981) also suggests that a lack of information is an important barrier to be overcome. Where this lack of knowledge by the individual was linked to the dispositional problems that learners had, for example problems of attitude, negative perceptions from prior learning or low expectations of success, there is little likelihood they will volunteer information to a
personal adviser, who could then identify any problem and offer advice and guidance which could lead to them starting on a learning programme (DfES 2006).

By becoming long term unemployed it can be hypothesised that all of the research group have been through a ‘life transition’ or ‘change’ and participation in educational activity can often be linked to these changes in life. There is a tension between how some individuals saw only positive aspects to change, while some found change negative or debilitating. This tension between the thrust of both arguments rests upon the belief that, consequences of ‘life transitions’ can vary from the beneficial, to the detrimental. The negative response found during questioning, was manifested as a lack of motivation or willingness to actively use this opportunity to change their situation. The group used the multiple barriers recorded during the research, as reasons for not starting learning provision. However, half of the 54% who said they lacked the correct qualifications and experience did see training as a positive means with which to take advantage of the opportunity to effect a life change after speaking to an adviser. This offers some support to the prediction that people do recognise the occurrence of a window of opportunity due to a change in life circumstances and some of the research group did grasp this opportunity to address their educational needs and, as predicted by Banks (1992) and Bynner (1992), this part of the group was willing to take the opportunity and start learning provision once it had been identified to them.

Although life transitions are a barrier to be overcome they can be linked to a number of other reasons for non participation by potential learners, one of which is attitude to education. The research group in response to questioning exhibited strong negative feelings towards previous learning episodes, which included their recollection of compulsory state education. Through questioning it was found that 47% had either been excluded or left school early, and were adamant that they had no intention of returning to a learning situation. This attitude can be used to lend support to the theory that there is a key correlation between the number of years spent in school and the likelihood of adults taking part in education programmes after that.

In complex industrialised societies school serves as a junction with society, which cannot be fully provided by either the family or peer group. Some of the statements made by the research group lent some support to this belief, through confirmation that they thought, family membership was based on kinship and peer group membership was a personal choice. There was a recognition that, membership of society is based on neither of these principles, and an understanding by individuals that they must learn to cooperate with those who are neither kin nor their friends in order to successfully engage in society by its rules. School does provide the context where these skills can be learned, and in a school a child must interact with others by a fixed set of rules. However, many of the 47% in the research group who had extended periods of exclusion from school and failed to engage fully with others while attending school, reported, they felt alienated from, and had difficulty engaging with others, in a work or learning environment. It also became apparent, while questioning this group, that the longer the time away from work or education, the greater were these feelings of alienation, which in turn was leading to a lower propensity to re-engage with either.

Around 60% of respondents had been previously employed in routine or semi-routine work and were found to have literacy and/or numeracy skills at entry level 3 or below. Less than 10% of respondents regarded their reading, writing or maths skills as below average, even amongst those with the lowest levels of ability. People often have unrealistic estimates of their ability and this was reflected in the research group responses, where almost half of those who were found to be at entry level (EL) or lower in literacy said, their everyday reading ability was very or fairly good. Further to this, two thirds of the research group felt that they were very or fairly good at number work. Only two percent had admitted their weak skills had hindered their job prospects or led to mistakes at work.
Approximately 90% of respondents had taken part in informal education and training outside school or work in reading, writing and numeracy. It can be shown that those attending such training had lower than average levels of skill when they enrolled. In the context of a lifelong process, where individuals learn from life experience, the slightly better assessment performance of course attendees, when compared to non-attendees suggests that informal learning does have impact. These findings were supported by the attendees’ own assessments. One third (30%) of who felt they had learned ‘a great deal’ and another 44% said they had learned ‘a fair amount’. Boshier (1973) in the congruence model of learner engagement, suggests the reason for this arises because of a similarity between the individuals’ perception of themselves, their self-concept, and the nature of the education programme or environment.

At the end of the early research stage the findings indicated that the majority of customers were moderately unmotivated and they were fairly accepting of their present situation. Unmotivated clients who resist change and prefer their current state do not want to or will not recognise that they have a problem(s) and that assistance is available to overcome it. However, this group could be persuaded to change their views and increase their level of engagement if given adequate information, advice and guidance. This is believed to be the first stage in reducing this tension, leading subsequently to the removal of barriers.

Responses to questions put to the research group highlighted the fact that people often resent being segmented or classified, which can be seen by them as a denial of their individuality or self-identity. They may be expected to react by reaffirming their identity in the various ways open to them. This was often manifested during interviews with their personal adviser (PA) in the form of aggressive and uncooperative behaviour towards the interviewer. In very extreme cases it has led to physical violence directed towards the interviewer or PA. These reactions must be understood in the context of personal dignity, which is often seen to be under some form of assault and are particularly prevalent in those identified with a skills need. During learning provision educational achievement is used as a label of success meaning failure can be seen as a weakness and is therefore often viewed as a threat by the individual. These self-protective reactions or resistances are linked to the difficulty the individual has in achieving awareness (Coffield, 2000). Resistances, noted during questioning of the research group could be described as valuable protectors of the individual’s dignity. At times they were combined with scepticism of the learning provision on offer and subsequently were used by the individual as a negative barrier preventing them from progressing onto learning provision.

This overall pattern that seemed to emerge in responses to the questionnaire and by interviewees who expressed the opinion that although they had poor reading and writing skills, “they were not interested in sorting me out before, so I’m not interested in going to courses now”. Potential learners were reluctant to return to a formal classroom setting for which, they still had memories from previous learning episodes involving issues of authority and identity. The problem of disaffection and lack of motivation, whether overt or covert, when applied to the potential adult learners, emerged from their struggle with authority and identity, which was found to have occurred during prior learning episodes in a classroom environment. Willis (1977, p39) identified a key factor for this thinking when writing about the educational system, hypothesising that schools attended by working class children put emphasis on rule following and behavioural control as this ‘reflects the needs of industry for low level workers who are closely supervised’. The factors put forward by the research group as reasons affecting motivation can also be used to support the hypothesis that socio-economic status or class is linked closely to participation in adult education. I found that motivation to engage will only emerge where expectation of success has a positive consequence. Where these positive values were found to be stronger than the negative consequences such as fear of failure or memories of prior learning episodes, again there was a greater propensity on the part of the potential learner to take part in a learning activity.
What did become clear is that a range of factors affected motivation, which were linked to prior learning experience, and in turn influenced how non-learners responded to the offer of training or support to help improve their current situation. Motivation, as described by Maslow (1970) in the hierarchy of needs model, alone is too simplistic to explain the non-learners behaviour. The humanistic psychology theory better summarises motives for engagement, which were often mixed and not as straightforward as reported by the research group during questioning.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the overall reasons put forward for participation in a learning activity to take place suggests, there is a need to remove or overcome barriers and obstacles put forward by individuals as reasons for non-participation. However the removal of barriers alone does not lead to an individual with a low level of LLN skills opting to address this issue. Indeed the policy culture of LLN provision for unemployed adults reinforces the individual’s notion of past failures with many potential learners being unable to see how they could improve their skills by any significant level. Responses indicate that participants already consider their LLN skills to be adequate. A number of key themes or patterns of participation started to emerge from the research that related to an individual’s age, level of previous education and their social group or class. The dispositional barriers faced by people from social backgrounds where learning is under-valued and less time is spent in educational activities continue to discourage participation and numbers of adult learners from these groups are either static or in some areas in decline.

There was a strong correlation found between relative success in schooling, further and higher education and a readiness to engage with organised adult education provision. While a key characteristic feature of non-participants was also found in the 50 + group who could not see the point of education at their age and consequently were unlikely to be involved. The dominating pattern that emerged, through analysis of interviews and from the questionnaire results from older workers, was that it’s not that they aren’t interested, but that education and training was quite different in the past, adult education tended to be ‘on the job’ and through apprenticeships. However, once started on learning provision, it was found, older learners are effective learners and are as capable as younger adults of retaining and putting into practice what they have learned.

The majority of those taking part in this research left school at the earliest opportunity and had subsequently spent the least time in education, therefore lending support to the theories of Boshier (1973) and McGivney (1990; 1993) who suggested that those with the least initial schooling are more likely to be non-participants in continuing or further education. The overall pattern that seemed to emerge from the data collected and collated confirmed the theories of Kidd (1978) McGivney (1990; 1993) and Moser (1999), that effective support is best focused on slowly but deliberately rebuilding the confidence and self esteem of unemployed learners; improving their life skills; training them in basic, but essential LLN skills, in order to help them prepare for the routines of learning provision. Further to this I found to retain and make learners feel valued there is a need to encourage realistic achievable goals, backed by the provision of a diversity of support services to address their individual needs. Time and resource restraints in learning provision, along with inflated expectations by customers of how quickly educational progress leading to qualifications could occur, can undermine the effectiveness of educational opportunities for this group of adults.

On completion of provision there was some dissatisfaction with the jobs that were being offered, and comments by the research group linked this to the type of work or levels of pay available. Having completed training provision, people’s expectations of a positive result leading to employment had been heightened, and this positive consequence meant they tended to be more selective in the nature of work they required (Ward & Edwards, 2002). There became a danger that if forced to take what they believed to be inappropriate work then the positive values or valence put to learning, would become negative values. This increase in negativity could lead to employment
becoming unsustainable, and the individual would be caught in a cycle of short periods of employment, punctuated by longer periods of unemployment, rather than the goal of sustained long-term work and future learning episodes.
References.


*This paper was added to the Education-line collection on 11 September 2009*