

Thinking History Active Learning

6 Active Learning demonstrations by Ian Dawson (2006)

(Available from Ian Dawson, 9 Gledhow Grange Walk, Leeds LS8 1PJ, £13.99 incl. postage)

This DVD is just one of the impressive products of Ian Dawson's National Teaching Fellowship project. It shows six examples of active learning approaches that Ian has undertaken with his trainee teachers. Three examples deal with the Norman Conquest and its aftermath. The others are concerned with the dissolution of the monasteries, medicine through time, and active learning for A-level students. The first example, entitled *What happened in 1066?*, demonstrates the exercise in full, and, whilst the others comprise only edited highlights, the full scripts relating to them can be found on Ian's *Thinking History* website at <www.thinkinghistory.co.uk>.

In the introduction to the DVD, Ian offers a rationale for the use of active learning approaches, a key argument being that they improve the standard of learning because students have to think 'from the insides of situations'. In other words, by taking on roles of people in the past, students can view and appreciate situations from differing contemporary perspectives. Thus, in the exercise dealing with events leading up to the Norman Conquest, the various individuals and groups involved, situated in their respective geographical locations, are charged with reasoning out the actions they would take as events unfold, with the uncertainties they face being clearly articulated. The invading and defending armies move with ease from one location to another – even if occasional prompting is required! - and can be recycled into another role as occasion demands. You have to be prepared in active learning to resurrect the deceased! The role players include observers from the different factions involved, who record the events taking place, and their contributions provide opportunity to make telling points about the problems associated with the reliability of historical evidence.

A major feature of the approach is the use of dramatic enactments that are intended to stick in the minds of students. King William, here played by Ian resplendent with crown, addressing his conquered subjects sternly in French makes a telling point about the fear and destruction that invaders bring. And the point is reinforced when, warming to his role, he cuts off a teddy bear's ear to represent the retribution William took during his harrying of the North in 1069. Additionally, simple props are used to highlight important issues. For example, a hair drier blowing into the faces of William and his followers as they wait on the Normandy coast makes the point about the impossibility of the Norman fleet sailing against the prevailing wind.

There is much to interest and stimulate teachers of history at all levels of education in the materials that have emerged from the *Thinking History* project, and a short review cannot hope to do full justice to them. Aside from helping us to appreciate the potential that active forms of learning can bring in deepening students' historical understanding, and inviting us to reflect on them, the DVD has the advantage of enabling us to see a highly-skilled and experienced practitioner at work. It is this dimension that adds greatly to its appeal and to the conviction that active forms of learning have a great deal to offer.

Geoff Timmins, University of Central Lancashire, March 2006