

Fans tell it how it is

Teachers sing the praises of a new digital applications qualification. **Dorothy Walker** reports

Seldom can a new qualification have been greeted with such enthusiasm as DiDA, the Diploma in Digital Applications from Edexcel. Introduced this year as a successor to GNVQ ICT, which is being phased out, DiDA has already won many fans among teachers. This term, 200,000 students from 1,200 schools are beginning the course, and Edexcel forecasts that 450,000 learners will be involved by this time next year.

"There are so many good words I could use about DiDA," says Mark Willmott, head of ICT at Brooke Weston City Technology College in Corby, which has been piloting the qualification for a year. "It is extremely flexible and the content is excellent. It prepares students for life in the 21st century and it will help them in every other course they do."

DiDA breaks a lot of new ground. It aims to build expertise in applying ICT purposefully and creatively. The qualification is paperless and there are no written exams. Students demonstrate their skills by tackling projects, showcasing their work as an e-portfolio – an electronic portfolio of evidence that is assessed online. The emphasis is on how the student goes about applying a range of software to meet the project brief, planning and managing the project along the way.

Four units are on offer. The first, using ICT, is the equivalent of one GCSE. Adding multimedia, graphics or ICT in enterprise adds another GCSE, and com-

pleting all four units makes a full DiDA award, which, like GNVQ ICT, is worth four GCSEs.

The choice will be extended next year with the release of three additional units covering web broadcasting and publishing, the moving image, and sound and audio. GNVQ ICT will be withdrawn in 2007.

Producers of teaching and learning resources have taken a variety of approaches to supporting a qualification acknowledged as more rewarding but also more challenging to teach.

The most high-profile resource package is *DiDA Delivered*, which is being offered free to all secondary schools in the country. It is being created in a project run by the North West Learning Grid (NWLG), with the support of the London Grid for Learning (LGfL).

Gary Clawson, chief executive of NWLG says: "GNVQ ICT was a pretty poor course, but schools took it because it was worth four GCSEs. DiDA is a wonderful course, but the full qualification is tougher to pass.

There is a danger that students might get only two GCSEs – and that would cause a major dip in some schools' results. So we wanted to help improve teachers' skills in the way they teach the course, and provide students with really exciting materials. If you want to show how to create the very best interactive resources, you have to use the very best interactive resources."

DiDA Delivered employs 3-D games-



3-D GAMING SOFTWARE IS ALSO BEING DEVELOPED FOR DiDA BY IMMERSIVE TECHNOLOGY, CREATOR OF KARZOUKANE AND MEDIA STAGE SOFTWARE. IMMERSIVE'S NEW SOFTWARE (PICTURED) ALLOWS STUDENTS AND TEACHERS TO CREATE THEIR OWN 3-D GAMES. JOHN GALLOWAY'S ARTICLE ON IMMERSIVE: ● www.tos.co.uk/online ● www.immersiveeducation.com/uk

based learning technology, allowing learners to interact with characters in 3-D worlds, as they would in a computer game. Gary says: "As an example, one of the DiDA projects involves conducting a survey. Students can go into a 3-D urban environment and ask questions of the characters, assessing the replies they receive and deciding how best to summarise the answers. The system analyses the student's performance and gives hints on how the survey techniques could be improved."

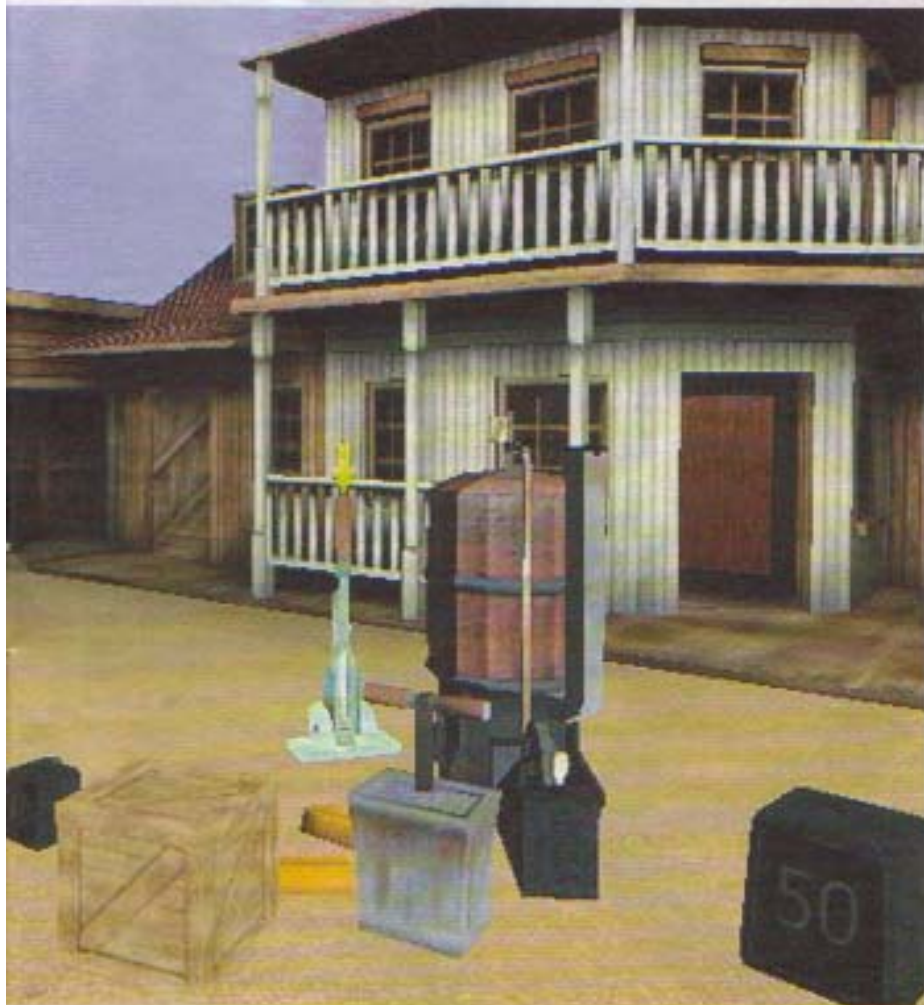
Gateshead-based specialists Caspian Learning are creating the 3-D worlds, and Gary says: "This is more powerful than anything that has been done before with 3-D game-based learning... DiDA focuses on industry-standard



needs, and as well as the qualification, students can gain industry-standard certificates – our resources offer six internationally recognised qualifications from Macromedia and Microsoft."

The *DiDA Delivered* teachers' resources focus on the software skills teachers need for the course. The NWLG is working with suppliers of virtual learning environment (VLE) software, aiming to ensure that schools can use their VLEs for storing and managing e-portfolios.

"DiDA is great," says David Mason, content manager for the London Grid for Learning (LGfL). "Edexcel has thought really hard about vocational skills in IT-related industries and also more generally and we have moved on from viewing *Microsoft Office* as the sole



Resources and contacts

● **DiDA Delivered**
Free to secondary schools.
dida.nwlg.org

● **Thomas Telford School online DiDA**. Annual licence fee of £3,000 includes five days training, and the use of other products in the school's online curriculum.
www.ttsonline.net

● **Brooke Weston's @tain DiDA**
An instalment of £1,500 per year for the first two years, after which schools can keep the software for free.
E-portfolios Manager costs £500 plus VAT.
www.atain.co.uk

● **Edexcel**
ida.edexcel.org.uk

● **London Grid for Learning**
www.lgfl.net

● **Hillingdon Grid for Learning**
www.hillingdongrid.org



they need real support in this area.

"Our resources offer teachers a lot of practical advice to help them understand the qualification and the assessment criteria – if students are moving off in the wrong direction, teachers need to be able to rein them in. For students, we cover project management and ICT skills, but we don't show them how to do their project tasks, and that is why our group have been so creative. The resources are media-rich, with video, audio and animated tutorials. Around 450 schools are currently subscribing to our DiDA resources – almost half the number that use our GNVQ materials."

At Brooke Weston College, Mark Willimott created DiDA resources for his pupils, and they are being sold to schools by @tain, Brooke Weston's commercial online learning arm. Mark says: "Interactive tutorials guide students through the software they need to use, and we cover knowledge-based skills, such as how to research and carry out a survey. There are practice activities and skills audits. The materials are differentiated, and students can work independently at their own pace.

"We have also created software which allows students to manage their e-portfolio and make it available to teachers. We are working with Edexcel on how its moderators can be given access, without the school having to send the e-portfolio to Edexcel."

About 100 schools have signed up for Brooke Weston's materials. Mark says: "More than a year ago we had people asking if we had DiDA resources. And it wasn't just teachers – heads, business managers, governing bodies and LEAs were ringing up. DiDA has generated huge interest."

In the London Borough of Hillingdon, DiDA is being introduced as part of an initiative that covers ICT from key stage 2 to the end of KS4. A learning passport scheme allows primary pupils to build an online portfolio of their work, taking it on to secondary school and employing the same online system to build their DiDA e-portfolios. The system was developed by the Hillingdon Grid for Learning (HGfL), which is also piloting DiDA teaching and learning resources created by Hillingdon's Haydon School.

Stuart Ellam, head of HGfL, says: "Haydon's head has been promoting ICT for years – massive investment has been made and the level of achievement has gone through the roof."

Of DiDA he says: "One of the issues with ICT is that students are way ahead of their teachers in lots of areas, and DiDA gives students a chance to really show what they can do. DiDA is a splendid way to build capabilities that can be applied across the curriculum. Done well, I believe DiDA will help boost achievement in all areas."

totem pole by which we judge someone's ICT capabilities."

DiDA Delivered is being made available to London schools, and LGfL has produced materials exemplifying the features of a good e-portfolio. Work is also under way on a history project for the multimedia unit of DiDA as an example of how ICT teachers can collaborate with other departments, an approach that Mason sees as "enormously beneficial for everyone concerned".

Thomas Telford School in Telford has added its DiDA resources to the range of online course materials it sells to schools. Jill Barrow, deputy head with responsibility for ICT, says: "We have had a DiDA pilot running alongside GNVQ ICT for a year, and we can

already see a significant difference between the two groups of students. The DiDA students have developed more independent thinking skills. They are more analytical and creative in applying ICT, and they are very open about seeking critical review from their peers. We have also found that once we have shown them the basics of some fairly powerful software, they just take it and run with it.

"There are two main caveats and these have determined our approach with the resources. First, the lessons are more demanding for teachers than GNVQ, because the students are not all doing the same task at the same time. And the biggest problem for our students has been managing big projects –