

After 20 years, a teacher reinvents her classroom using technology

by **NICHOLE DOBO**

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Teacher [Valyncia O. Hawkins](#) knew she needed extra time with students who arrived in her classroom behind grade level, but slowing down the whole class risked boring the more advanced students. But even after 20 years as a teacher, Hawkins still didn't have a good method to keep everyone moving forward. The 21 children in her classroom at Anne Beers Elementary School shared the label of fifth grader, but they arrived with different needs. It was clear she was losing some of them. It was disheartening.

“When I would stand and talk they would be bouncing off the walls,” Hawkins recalled.

Convinced there had to be a better way, this D.C. Public Schools Teacher took a fellowship with the CityBridge Foundation in 2013 to research and develop a new teaching method. She traveled to see other schools in states such as California and New Jersey, and she noticed technology offered a solution. It inspired her to create a new method of instruction. And in the process she found her zeal for teaching returned.



Fifth grade teacher Valyncia O. Hawkins and a student volunteer from Georgetown University work with students at the front of the room to give them extra help on a lesson as other students move ahead at their own pace on lessons on a computer. (Photo: Nichole Dobo)

Today, she is no longer standing in front of the room for a whole class period, trying to keep everyone on the same page. She developed a new style of teaching that gives students a mix of technology and small-group instruction. Online tools, most of them free, helped her customize lessons for students. She periodically checks progress through the year to adjust.

“I am meeting them where they are,” she said.

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That’s not to say she found a method that is easier. It requires a lot of advance planning. She must craft several lesson plans for one class period.

On a recent day, when students arrived the first task was correcting the punctuation on two sentences projected on a smart board. Everyone gathered at the front of the room, composition books in hand, and they got to work fixing run-ons. They had four minutes to do it. Hawkins knew some students would move quicker, and her new teaching method meant she was prepared for it.

“I am meeting them where they are,” teacher Valyncia O. Hawkins said. “When I would stand and talk they would be bouncing off the walls.”

After answering correctly, students grabbed laptop computers and got to work on more challenging problems provided by online lessons that allowed them to work at their own pace.

This allowed Hawkins to work with students who took longer to arrive at the right answer.

“After we add a period is the ‘I’ lowercase?” Hawkins asked the smaller group who remained.

“No,” a student responded, a few moments later.

“Right, it is capitalized because you are always important,” Hawkins said.

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A blended learning classroom gives children a mix of online and in-person instruction, and some say it offers more personalized learning. There are many ways teachers can do it, but Hawkins created something that is her own model. There is a lot of movement in her classroom, with many students breaking off to work on lessons at their own pace after the starting the class together. Groups of desks offer places for children to gather to work on laptops. A small couch near the front allows for comfy seating for small group-instruction at a smart board. Singular desks in corners welcome children who seek solitude while they work.

The children are often allowed a measure of independence. For instance, they can choose from several vocabulary lessons. They can wear headphones. Or not.



A student in a fifth grade class at Anne Beers Elementary School works on a computer lesson that allows her to move faster or slower than classmates in the same class. (Photo: Nichole Dobo)

Student JaNaia Jackson, 10, said her favorite lessons in English are finding the theme and main idea, she said. She notices that some of her peers like to take the computers off and work quietly on their own. Others like to stay near each other. There are other perks, such as getting to write with a tool that is preferred over a pencil and paper.

“I love to type,” she said. “I just love to work on typing.”

Right now, Hawkins is the only educator using this model of teaching in her school. In other D.C. schools, the district is coordinating blended-learning experiments.

Hawkins has noticed students are more engaged and there are fewer behavioral issues, something [other D.C. educators said](#) they have noticed with this model of instruction. The novelty of the technology isn't the only factor, Hawkins said. Personalized instruction that allows students some freedom to explore keeps them from getting bored or frustrated.

“It just helped me feel like I was contributing to the learning of the students,” Hawkins said. “It helped address those students who don't necessarily follow the norms.”



Students put away folders at the end of an English and language arts class at Anne Beers Elementary School. Valyncia O. Hawkins found a new use for milk crates – they are the perfect size for storing the folders. (Photo: Nichole Dobo)

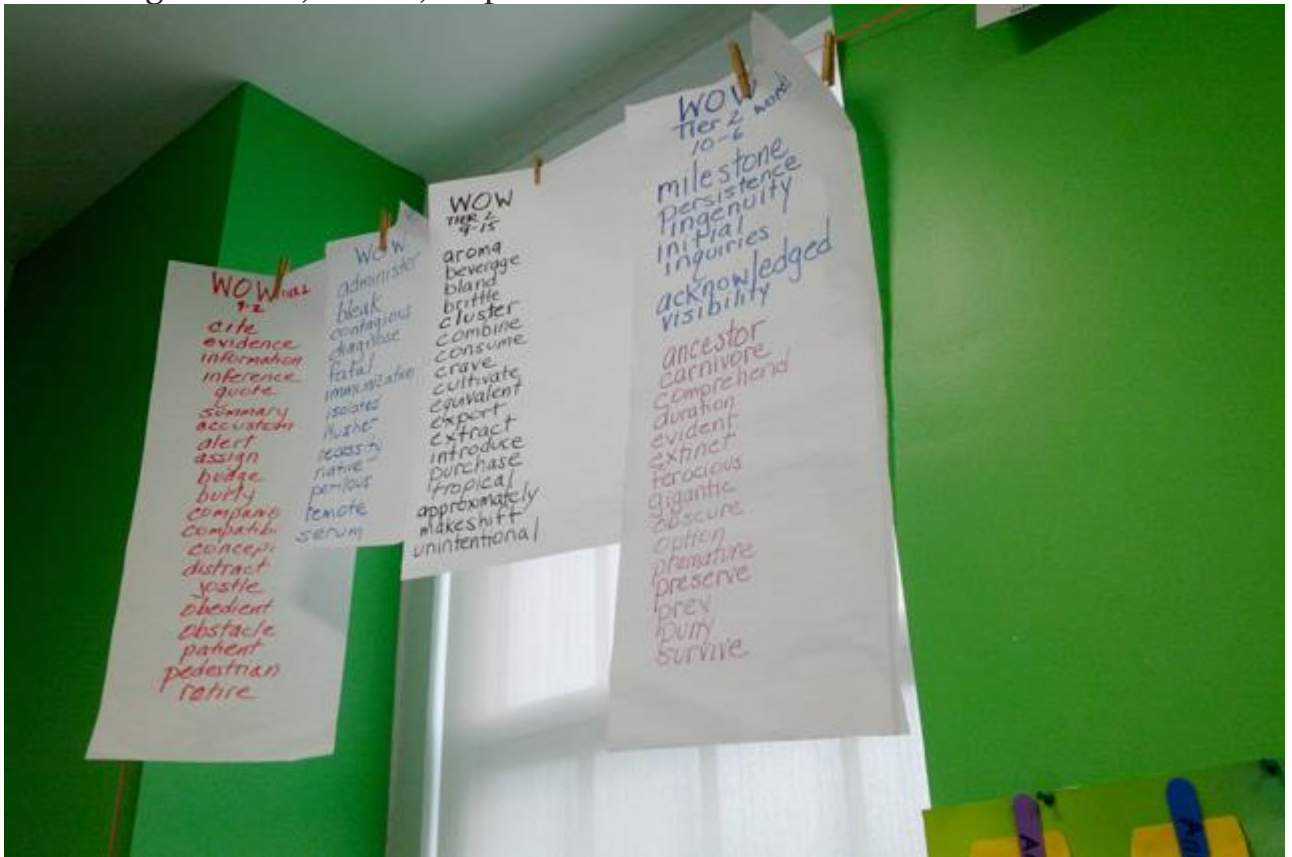
That’s not to say the transition was easy or the results perfect. Hawkins considers her classroom a work in progress. She continues to remodel it to fit the needs of the school day and her students.

This year, for example, she had to re-organize her blended classroom because she now teaches English language arts to all fifth graders in the school. Before, she taught multiple subjects to the same 20 students all day. The new schedule means she has more students, so she is customizing plans for about 63 children who transition in and out of her room for English class. The new schedule has also shortened the class-time window. (That’s not to say there is less time for English and language arts at the school — writing instruction is now included across other subjects, such as science class.)

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Another challenge: Managing the multiple online platforms, such as quizzes, learning games and online grade reporting for parents. Data on the websites she uses aren’t connected so Hawkins has to juggle them to monitor how her students are progressing.

But those obstacles haven't sent Hawkins back to the familiar way of teaching. She continues to find a way to navigate, and it often means finding low-cost, or free, help.



A word list on the wall includes color-coded lists based on the level a student is working at in this fifth-grade classroom at Anne Beers Elementary School. (Photo: Nichole Dobo)

Volunteer students from Georgetown University spend time in her classroom as aides to help with things like transitions between the groups and the inevitable technical issue, such as a misplaced log in for a computer. And plastic milk crates Hawkins snagged in the cafeteria are the perfect size for storing student folders that organize personalized learning materials. To organize online resources, she puts links on a free website that she's used for the classroom for a long time. Students are in one of five groups based on their ability level. Each group has a "playlist" of lessons. They access it in the classroom, and it's available at home for the students who have Internet access.

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On Tuesday, most students worked independently on computers in the classroom to answer a question about the class word of the day, "persistence." Meanwhile, Hawkins stood in front of about 10 students with the word projected on a smart board. The students were asked to define the word. They wrote in composition books, pencils in hand and dictionaries by their side.

Hawkins challenged students to explain how the word “persistence” was subtly different than the examples they were giving, which would better fit the word “repetition.” She called the entire classes’ attention, including the faster-moving students who had been working independently. They had a joint class discussion, and together everyone arrived at the answer.

“Even though you know there is trouble ahead you have persistence,” Hawkins said.

This story was written by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news website focused on inequality and innovation in education. Read more about [digital education](#)