

- Announcer: [00:05](#) Welcome to the Rethink ELA podcast hosted by English language arts teacher Michelle Waters. Prepare to receive strategies, products and expert advice tailored to help teachers feel social awareness, student agency and voice in their ELA classrooms.
- Michelle: [00:26](#) Hello. Hi, I'm Michelle Waters. I'm the host of rethink ELA podcast, a brand new podcast for a secondary and primary English language arts teachers. I am currently sitting here with Shana Malott who is the senior English teacher at Cache High School in Oklahoma. We're at Cherry Berry in Lawton trying to stay warm drinking coffee at a frozen yogurt establishment. We were going to have a little promotion and we will get started with Shanna interviewing me about the vision and mission of this new podcast.
- Announcer: [01:00](#) Just a few moments when it comes to reaching students through literature, finding reliable resources is challenging. Your search is over. Rethink ELA podcast is here to provide student tested research based strategies, products and advice. Here's your host Michelle Waters.
- Shanna: [01:23](#) This is Shanna Malott and I'm here talking with Michelle Waters. This is her first podcast episode and she's going to talk about her ideas for Rethink ELA.
- Michelle: [01:33](#) Awesome. I am so excited to be here and have an opportunity to meet with you in Lawton and talk to you. So I'm very excited about getting this podcast for rethink ELA started and I understand you have questions to ask.
- Shanna: [01:46](#) I have lots of questions. So the first one, who are you as a teacher?
- Michelle: [01:51](#) Well, to begin with, one of the things I like to tell my students is that I knew I wanted to be a teacher when I was seven and then I forgot for 30 years. They kind of look at me funny when I tell them that that just does not compute for them. Basically what happened is I had teachers who recognized that I was a writer and being a very shy, quiet child, the teaching part of my personality didn't really come through, so I was encouraged to be a writer and so I became a newspaper reporter after working on newspaper staffs in high school and in college and then professionally. After having kids and realizing the two to 10 shift on the newspaper wasn't going to work with having young children at home.

Michelle: [02:31](#) I ended up starting a web design and hosting company and after almost 10 years of running that company, I realized I want to give back. I want to do for young people what teachers did for me. They pushed me to be a writer, to use the talents that they saw that I had and I wanted to do the same thing. And towards that goal, I've kind of hit the ground running as a teacher, trying to figure out how to teach because I know how to write, I know how to run a business. You also to know how to teach in order to be a teacher. And so I started trying to figure that out and as part of that process, I've become an Oklahoma writing project, teacher consultant. Last year I kind of turned a corner in my teaching and who is nominated the Masonic Lodge Teacher of Today at my school.

Michelle: [03:16](#) So, I... to me that means so much because it seems like I was able to really connect with the students and help them understand the value of what I'm teaching. I'm also a national board candidate, which I will be talking about that in a future episode. I have six hours towards my master's degree and will be taking a three hour course in the spring. The first time I've taken a master's course during the school year, so if I seem a little insane, there's a reason for that. So, basically it's just as a teacher I'm also a learner and a writer.

Shanna: [03:50](#) All right, so why did you start teaching?

Michelle: [03:51](#) Well, I mentioned that I wanted to give back and to help students see who they are and help them understand who they are. I know one of my primary goals when I started being a teacher was to find those hidden writers. Those students in class who, well, let me back up on that. Actually. I wanted to find those students who already knew they were writers and encourage them to continue writing and to become better writers.

Michelle: [04:17](#) But last year in particular, I realized that there are some kids out there that don't look like your normal writers, they're not your yearbook editors, they're not the kid who's constantly writing poetry in the back corner quietly. Some of these kids are bouncing around the room and driving you insane and some of them are maybe quiet and kind of a little sullen, perhaps some of them might be in the band, some of them might be on the football team, some of them might be playing basketball. You never know where you're going to find a kid who has a great story to tell. I know as English teachers, we talk a lot about kids having trouble with grammar or not remembering to capitalize or not being able to use compound complex sentences.

- Michelle: [04:59](#) I think a lot of that is editing that can be taken care of later in the writing process, but I also think that a lot of kids get a paper back where they've had a bunch of errors counted off and they think, well, I can't write, I can't spell, so I can't write, or I can't remember to capitalize when I'm writing my draft, so therefore I'm not a writer.
- Michelle: [05:18](#) But that's not true. There are many children who have a story, at least one story that they need to tell and I can help them get past the grammatical issues. I mean, as an editor on the newspaper, or actually my editor on the newspaper, she told me a writer is only as good as their editor and I thought, "Well, you know what, that that makes sense because I write my ideas down and then the editor looks at it and says, Hey, here's where you messed up or is that really what you meant?" "No, that really wasn't what I meant. Let me change that real quick". And so I kind of serve that function for my kids and some of them tell me, "Well, I'm not a very good writer". Well I'm your editor and a writer is only as good as their editors and you therefore must be great writer because I am a great editor. And they say, "Oh, okay" and kind of look at me funny. It's all right.
- Shanna: [06:04](#) As an [inaudible 00:06:05] teacher, what did you do to learn how to teach?
- Michelle: [06:08](#) Well, when I first stepped into a teaching job after having been a substitute teacher for a while, I kind of thought I knew what I was doing. I also knew well and knew enough from previous experience at other jobs that if you think you know what you're doing, there's a good chance that you're probably clueless, and so I immediately started trying to find people in my school building to help me figure out what I was doing, is this a good idea or what do you know about the student that can help me reach them? I discovered that librarians are gold mines. They know all the kids. They know how to, if there's any way to convince a kid to read, they know those secrets, those tricks.
- Michelle: [06:46](#) And so the librarian in particular really helped me immensely with figuring out what I was doing and how to connect with the kids. I talked to some other teachers, my department head, the other grade level English teachers, some of them were more helpful than others. When you're a new teacher, that's something you have to learn quickly is there some people that are going to help you on, there's some people that are going to lead you astray and you've got to stay away from one group and cling to the other group. Please help me.

Michelle: [07:13](#) After I did that, I had been a host of an online forum and so it was natural for me to try to find a forum or message board of other teachers that would help me. And so I went to a site called A to Z Teacher Stuff and found a lot of good advice there. And then from that experience found blogs written by teachers. And from there I actually ended up in a new school my second year of teaching and I had an amazing co-teacher who helped me with things like setting up procedures and of course I went from the high school level to the middle school level. So procedures were way more important at that point. But she revolutionized my teaching and helping me connect with the kids and helping me figure out how to be a teacher.

Michelle: [07:55](#) After that experience, I discovered Twitter and started following teachers. And then one day I was wanting to read a bill that had been, or that was being considered by the Oklahoma legislator, and I went to download a copy of it and it wasn't available online. So I thought, I'll just go ask on Twitter, maybe Claudia Swisher or somebody will have a copy of it that they can send me in PDF form. Well, Josh Flores, who is our fearless leader at the time, he replied and said, "Hey, I've got a copy of it in my office. Why don't you stop by and pick up a copy?" And I thought, "Oh wow. When the Oklahoma state department of education, English language arts director says, Hey, stop by my office", then you do that. And so I hopped in my car the next day and drove up there and had a really insightful conversation with him, picked up the copy of the bill and then he asked me to be involved in the ELA OK convening, which I think is where I met you.

Shanna: [08:50](#) Yeah, I was there.

Michelle: [08:52](#) Yes. Yes. So I was able to meet you and some other teachers and just make those networking connections and get to know people that I could learn from and then I started realizing I need to listen to my students.

Michelle: [09:05](#) Going back to the high school level and not being in a team environment like you are at the middle school level. Frequently, in the high school level, you're kind of on your own and at that point you really have to partner with the students because if they're not on your side, it's you battling 116 people and you're not going to win. And so I started partnering with the students and realizing, Hey, if I see them as human beings and treat them like human beings and recognize who they are and try to help them see how the tools that I'm trying to hand them, the reading and the writing, can benefit them, then we're going to

be able to work together. That's where I'm at now is just trying to continue to learn how to do that.

Michelle: [09:47](#) But you can't just teach your subject and go home. You have to teach the whole child, even if they're big, surly teenagers, which actually at that point, especially if they're big, surly teenagers because they're the ones that need you the most.

Shanna: [10:00](#) So why did you start Rethink ELA?

Michelle: [10:02](#) I started Rethink ELA initially as Mrs. Waters English, because it was about me and about my journey, about me figuring out who I am as a teacher and just taking that journey to go from knowing nothing to wherever that was going to take me. And I started the site in June of 2012 I figured wherever I'm at in my journey, there's going to be people ahead of me that I can learn from that maybe can come to my blog and say, "Hey, you know, you don't know what you're talking about. You need to figure this out". Or people behind me who can say, "Oh wow, I had no idea I learned something from you".

Michelle: [10:33](#) And so that was my initial purpose for starting my website. But since then, my direction has changed. I've realized that my business, the products that I create, the lesson plans, and they're not just about me. I'm partnering with teachers and writers to produce lesson plans and other units to help amplify student voices, to help students realize that they already have a voice. I know some people will say, "Well, I'm giving students a voice". Well, no, you're not. Students already have a voice. Some of them just don't know they have a voice and some of them don't have space to be heard. So in my classroom, I need to provide my students with space to be heard with the tools that they need to elevate and amplify their voices and make sure that they know that there are people out there who do care what they have to say. And that what they have to say will have a positive impact on somebody else and will also positively impact them.

Michelle: [11:26](#) But not only will students benefit from that journey, but other teachers will as well. And so by partnering with teachers, by talking even more about what I'm learning and about what other teachers are learning. For example, in the future I'm going to interview other teachers, including you, about topics that can help all of us grow and become better teachers and better partners with our students. So not only do I want teachers to benefit from journey, I want their students, not just mine, but their students to benefit as well. The students should be at the

center of everything we do as teachers. Someone here, I don't know if it was a few weeks or a few days ago on Twitter, said that, "If I am presenting at conferences and getting published, but my students aren't, what am I really doing? If my students' voices aren't being heard, what am I doing?"

Michelle: [12:13](#) That's one of the reasons why I had students last year or encouraged them to enter writing contest so that they could see, Hey, I can write so they can be recognized for that so they could share their work out there. You know, I have some former students that I'm encouraging to write and to put their work out there so that they can continue to have their voices heard.

Shanna: [12:33](#) What do you do to amplify your students' voices to invest in and build their futures?

Michelle: [12:40](#) Well, to amplify my students' voices like I mentioned, having them submit their writing to contests is kind of the end game. Having them write blogs of their own is an end game. Having them get on social media and set up profiles that are geared towards their profession or their hobby is the end game. Getting there, I don't have all the answers and that's why I'm starting this podcast. Why I have this website, why I'm all over Twitter and Facebook and Instagram now and just trying to connect with other people who have some of those answers.

Michelle: [13:16](#) I think teaching is like a big puzzle and each of us has a piece and sometimes some of us have a few more pieces and you know, some of us have a bunch of pieces and it's for a different puzzle and where to call kind of confused why, I have no idea what's going on with you. But we all have pieces to the puzzle and if we work together we can figure it out. The students sometimes, they're right there with this and they have pieces to the puzzle too and sometimes they have completely different pieces and we're trying to figure out what, where do these pieces go in this puzzle and maybe we're all looking at the wrong puzzle. Maybe it's another puzzle.

Michelle: [13:46](#) It's kind of like I had the pieces to the teaching puzzle and they never would fit into my writing puzzles. And it didn't make any sense until I realized, Oh, I'm supposed to be a teacher too. And so now I have all of those pieces and all of those puzzles kind of put together. So, that's what this podcast is about, it's learning from each other and how to serve our students in our English language arts classrooms. The website, the podcasts, the products that I create, the online marketing I do, also all model for my students, how they can amplify their voices and earn a

living by doing so. Frequently, when we do our quick writes, I will sit down and write with the students and I've had a student say, "You know, it means a whole lot to us." To me in that particular student's case "to see you doing what we're doing".

- Michelle: [14:28](#) They realize that I wasn't just giving them busy work or making them do stuff just for the sake of it, that I was giving them something to do that was important and when they buy in like that, then you don't have a lot of problems. You have students who go out there and use these tools that I've given them.
- Shanna: [14:45](#) Thank you Michelle Waters.
- Michelle: [14:46](#) Well thank you Shanna. I appreciate you taking your time to meet me here at Cherry Berry with this lovely coffee and interview me. I'm looking forward to interviewing you again in the future.
- Shanna: [14:56](#) It will be fun.
- Michelle: [14:57](#) Awesome. Thank you so much.
- Announcer: [15:00](#) Encourage your high school students to share their stories, discuss building a representative society and develop their writing skills with this set of 15 highly engaging lesson plans. You can mix and match to meet your students' needs. Download this unit at [rethinkela.com](http://rethinkela.com) slash SJWP.