

Donald in Writing Wonderland

By Matt Morales

The sun was gently setting behind the horizon in the quiet town of Duckburg, USA. The children were finishing their baseball practices and play rehearsals, getting ready to go home, eat dinner, and go out to play again. Parents were completing their long drives home on the freeway after a long day's work. Everyone everywhere in the town was getting ready to relax the night away, except, of course, at the Duckburg Junior High School. Most of the students had left for the night with a few waiting for their rides or buses after practice. Even most of the teachers were getting ready to go home, but there was still one diligent worker left in his classroom, one Mr. Donald Duck.

It was amazing to think of the transformation Donald had undergone over the past year. Not too long ago, Donald lamented his years at school as a student, considering most of his classes boring and worthless. That was, of course, until one fateful day last year when Donald took a little detour into Mathmagic Land and learned of the many ways numbers, equations, and the elements of mathematics affected the world, even in his own private corner. After that occurrence, Donald never looked at math or school the same way again. In fact, he decided to become a teacher and share his love of numbers with as many young people as possible. Now, here he was working into the night, grading papers and preparing lessons for his algebra classes at Duckburg Junior High. Donald loved his new life and took a moment to lean back in his chair thinking about the past year.

Suddenly a knock came on Donald's doorframe, causing him to lose his balance and crash to the floor in his chair, squawking all the way. Becoming a teacher hadn't exactly helped Donald with his poise or anger management. "All right, who's the wise

guy, eh?” Donald muttered as he pulled himself up by the top of his desk. As his eyes peered over his desk, he could make out the form standing in his doorway. It was one of the English teachers, Mickey Mouse, with a look of concern etched on his face.

“Donald, are you okay?” asked Mickey. When Donald responded with nothing except for a snort, Mickey decided to just deliver his message and go. “Uh, Principal Von Drake, asked me to take on a little project. He wanted me to assemble a math teacher, a history teacher, and a science teacher, and next year, the four of us are going to try our hands at team teaching. Instead of teaching in our separate classes, we’ll all be teaching together, which means we all have to become familiar with each other’s subjects. He’s considering taking the school in a new direction, and since you’re the most popular math teacher we have here, I figured that the kids would really respond to you. Let me know if you’re interested.” Mickey finished his final sentence, and seeing that Donald still had daggers in his eyes, decided to leave well enough alone and make his way away from Donald’s classroom.

“Stupid mouse,” Donald muttered as he made his way back into his chair. Why would he be interested in this whole thing anyway? Maybe he could see himself getting interested in history or science. Those subjects were like math with actual theories and facts that could be learned and tested but not English. Why would he or anybody else be interested in teaching that? Novels could be read on students’ own time, and as far as writing is concerned, they got enough experience with that in their other classes. Besides, Donald remembered his high school English experiences. All his teachers ever let him write were boring papers that read more like encyclopedia entries than anything that actually mattered to them. Why would he want to do that to his students? Donald

went back to grading his papers. He decided to give that mouse a piece of his mind in the morning.

Even though he didn't have that many papers left to grade, it took Donald nearly two hours to finish the task. Thoughts of Mickey, writing, and team teaching would not let him be. When he finally finished grading, it was nearly 8pm. Donald knew that he was the last person left in the school, and peering out into the darkened hallway only confirmed this suspicion. Donald turned out the lights and stepped into the dark hallway, or at least what he thought should be the hallway. Instead, Donald stepped onto thin air and proceeded to fall for what seemed like forever, at first plummeting, but then gradually beginning a slow descent. He finally landed head down in a shallow pool of water.

“Oh, no. Not this again,” Donald began to say to himself.

“Well, hello, Donald,” came a familiar voice, “and welcome to...”

“I know, I know. Mathmagic Land,” finished Donald, as he stood up and shook the water from his body.

“Actually, no,” retorted the smooth disembodied voice of the Narrator. “This is somewhere you've never visited before. This is Writing Wonderland.”

“Writing Wonderland!” squawked Donald. He began to look around at his surroundings. It sure looked a lot like Mathmagic Land, except for one major difference. As he looked around, he could not see any discernible boundaries. He was surrounded on all sides by a black, smoky void. The only difference between this place and Mathmagic Land was that instead of random numbers floating in the void, random words and

punctuation marks filled the air of Writing Wonderland. “What happened? Did you get demoted?”

“Oh, of course not, I am the voice of all the realms of knowledge. Whether they be Mathematics, Writing, Reading, History, Science, Etceteras. You see, Donald, they all hold the equal footing in the realm of the mind. No one body of knowledge is more important than another.”

“Well that all sounds very impressive,” replied Donald, “but what does that have to do with me? I’ve already visited you before.”

“Yes,” continued the Narrator, “and we were all very impressed with your progress in Mathematics. Now, however, I’m afraid we need to work on your appreciation of English, or more specifically, writing.”

“Writing!” exploded Donald. “You called me back for something as useless as Writing? Why I oughta...” he continued, shaking his fist at the invisible voice.

“Whoa! Whoa, Donald. If I recall correctly, this is how you reacted the very first time you saw Mathmagic Land. Don’t worry, Donald. I’m not saying it’s your fault this time. As far as your love for writing is concerned, I think we can blame that on your teachers. They never did let you have any fun with writing, did they? It was all copying definitions and other facts out of books before making you reproduce that very same information on a piece of paper of your own, wasn’t it? There was not any creativity involved. No room for you to actually think. Don’t worry. By the time I’m through with you, you’ll have a newfound appreciation for writing, and you’ll put all your old English teachers to shame.”

Donald thought this over. Sure, everything the Narrator said made sense. The biggest reason he hated writing as a student, and still did today, was the strictness of his teachers. He had always known that there was something else to writing besides what his teachers had focused on, but he could never figure out how his teachers were supposed to give him that information. As a Math teacher, he was not sure how he was supposed to give that “something else” to his students. After visiting Mathmagic Land, that was one of the main reasons that he had decided to become a Math teacher. Mathematics was factual. Sure, one could do creative things with it after learning the basics, but the teaching was all factual and Donald had no idea of how to teach anything but these factual basics to his students, especially in a subject such as writing that he participated in so little himself. He opened his beak to protest.

“Hold it, Donald,” came the voice of the Narrator. “I know what you’re going to say. Don’t worry, there’s room for much more than English teachers in the teaching of writing.”

“There is?” questioned Donald.

“Of course. Besides, we would never have brought you here if we didn’t think you were up for the job. I’m willing to bet that you know much more about writing than you give yourself credit for. What sort of writing do you do in your life, Donald?”

Donald began to scratch his head. He really had to think on this one, as he could not recall ever doing that much important writing in his life. Finally, an idea came to him. “Well, I make out a grocery list every week,” he said meekly.

“That’s perfect!” exclaimed the Narrator in a boisterous tone.

“Perfect?”

“Well, a grocery list isn’t the top of the heap,” replied the Narrator, regaining his composure, “but it’s a definite starting place, and it even involves your home subject of Mathematics. Let me show you.”

With the Narrator’s last words, a kitchen started to materialize around Donald. The last object to appear was an open refrigerator stocked with all sorts of food imaginable. “Donald, would you please pick up the ketchup and mustard bottles?” asked the Narrator.

Not sure of the significance of the condiments, Donald removed them from the refrigerator. As he looked at them, he could see that the ketchup bottle was almost full while the mustard bottle was nearly empty. “Donald,” continued the Narrator, “Tonight, you are making dinner for both yourself and Daisy. You will need both ketchup and mustard for this. Which one are you going to write on your grocery list?”

“Mustard,” replied Donald, still unsure of what was going on.

“And why is that?” asked the Narrator.

“Well, I have less of that than the ketchup. What does this have to do-“

“See,” interrupted the Narrator. “Using basic mathematical concepts ‘less’ and more,’ you know what to write on your grocery list. Every time you sit down to make out your grocery list, you must think of things such as this.”

“Okay,” said Donald. “I think I see where you’re going with this. No matter how small the task may be, I always have to think when I write. Everybody has to know how to think, and writing is a good tool to get people to start thinking. That’s nice, but I think I’m going to have to teach more than just shopping lists if I teach this interdisciplinary class.”

“Well, Donald,” replied the Narrator, “that’s why I called this a starting point. There’s much to learn after this, but at least now you can see the link between thinking, writing, and mathematics. Now, let’s move on to something a little more substantial.”

As the Narrator spoke, the kitchen around Donald began to disappear, slowly being replaced by a swirling smoke that eventually formed a chalkboard. Suddenly, a piece of chalk jumped up and an invisible hand began to write out the narrator’s equations.

“Donald, what’s two plus two?” asked the Narrator.

“Four.”

“How about fifteen minus eight?”

“Seven.”

“Four times nine?”

“Thirty-six.”

“Nine divided by three?”

“Three.”

Finally, the piece of chalk drew a large question mark in the middle of the board. “Why?” asked the Narrator.

Donald could feel his pride building up inside of him. He knew the answer to these questions. Finally, he would be the smart one. “Well, you see three goes into nine three times and...”

“No, Donald,” interrupted the Narrator. “I mean, why does nine divided by three equal three? Why not four or five? Why does three fall at exactly the right place to go into nine three times perfectly? Why can’t two plus two equal seven?”

Donald began to ponder these questions. For the first time in what seemed like forever, he did not understand a math question. He knew the answers to all of the equations. They were easy enough that he didn't even have to think to answer them. The Narrator's questions, however, made him pause for thought.

Realizing that Donald was not going to answer any time soon. The Narrator continued. "Popular research suggests that while students know how to solve math problems, few of them, if any, can explain why. Most of them mindlessly follow the mechanics to correct answers, but none of them know how they got there, and the teachers never even give a second look. They're content with the correct answers."

Donald knew that this was all true, but he did not see what this had to do with writing. He was about to ask when the Narrator answered for him. "Journals, Donald."

"Journals," retorted Donald. "You mean, like, diaries?"

The Narrator gave a little chuckle. "Actually, Donald, they are somewhat like diaries, but in a more academic sense. Instead of writing about who they want to go to the dance with, students use these journals to write about how they feel about what they are currently studying."

"How they feel?" questioned Donald. He wasn't sure about this. He was a teacher of Mathematics, not a therapist.

"Yes," came the reply. "For example, let us say that you had just finished introducing your students to the Pythagorean theorem. You could then have them write a short journal response to the lesson. They could write about how comfortable or uncomfortable they are with this new piece of information. They could write about how they already know about the theorem or if they are scared to death of using it. If any

students readily understand the theorem, they could explain how it affects the world around them. This is a great way for students to express their fears and concerns without having to experience the sometimes daunting task of speaking in front of the class. Also, if you choose to read their journals, Donald, they can really give you an inside look into how effective your teaching actually is.”

This idea of journals was beginning to make sense to Donald. When he was a student, he had never been exposed to journals in any of his classes, least of all Math. That was probably why his teachers had done such a shoddy job. They had never asked for any written student response to what they were teaching, and when they asked for verbal response, most of the students, including Donald, were so afraid of being considered stupid that they did not even think about asking for help. Because of this, his teachers probably thought that they were all doing excellent jobs. It was sad to say, but Donald even saw some of this amongst his own students. After grading test papers and homework, Donald could tell that not all of his students understood Math to the best of their abilities, and yet many of them refused to ask for help in class. Perhaps these journals could be the solution to this problem. Donald only had one question: “Say I go along with your journal idea and collect them after the students write. How would I grade them?”

“Be careful, Donald,” warned the Narrator. “This a trap that a lot of teachers fall into. While you can certainly give students credit for turning them in, journals are not meant to be given a simple letter grade.”

“Well, how am I supposed to give feedback then?” wondered Donald.

“I’ll tell you what,” replied the Narrator, “Let’s see how you would respond to a journal. Here’s a journal entry I wrote in high school.” As he said the last words, an enormous hard covered tome materialized over Donald before falling right on top of him.

“Ahhh!” squawked Donald as the huge book forced him to the ground. “Very impressive,” continued the duck as he made his way out from under the book.

“Thank you very much.”

“Do you mind if I borrow a pen?”

“Certainly,” said The Narrator as a red pen materialized in Donald’s hand.

For the next hour, Donald poured over the Narrator’s “brief” journal entry. He showed no signs of stopping until the Narrator interrupted with, “Excuse me, Donald, but I do have to get you back to your world sometime. Why don’t you show me what you have so far?”

“Sure,” said Donald as he made one more mark in the book. He then lifted the open book to the sky for the Narrator’s “eyes” to see.

“What?!” bellowed the Narrator as he looked at his journal. His “hands” grabbed the book and began to flip through the pages. Donald had marked almost every page with what seemed like an endless supply of red check marks and suggestions. The biggest surprise, though, was on the last page: a huge “70%” in a red circle.

“I’m sorry,” replied Donald, but you had a lot of grammatical mistakes.

“Listen, Duck. I’ll have you know-,” began the Narrator in a threatening voice. Luckily, he caught himself and was able to regain his composure. “Donald, this is not how an educator responds to a student’s journal.”

“It isn’t?”

“Most certainly not,” continued the Narrator. “These journals are a free form write for students. They are writing without the aide of a dictionary or English textbook. The point isn’t for them to write technically perfect papers. If anything, that can be saved for a final project in their English classes. In the case of journals, the students’ only job is to clearly express their feelings on the lesson or lessons at hand. And you most certainly do not put a letter or percentage grade on the journal. That can only lead to the further intimidation of your students. Instead, give them some verbal feedback on their feelings. Give them support in trying to understand new ideas. Give them further clarification into the lesson, and ask for some back in return if you do not understand their journals.”

“Oh,” murmured Donald. He hated to admit it, but this whole writing in class thing was beginning to make sense. He could only tell so much from students writing numbers on paper and refusing to talk in class. If he introduced his students to these journals, he could definitely get a better idea of what was going on in their heads, and if he could get a better understanding of that, he would probably be a better teacher.

“So,” began Donald, “I guess there is room for writing in the Math classroom.”

“Yes, Donald. I’m glad that you can see that now,” replied the Narrator.

“And I guess that I should agree to team teach with Mickey.”

“Now, I didn’t say that,” said the Narrator. “I just wanted you to get an appreciation for writing before you totally dismissed the idea. You need to have a meeting with Principal Von Drake, Mickey, and the other teachers before you make that decision. And if Mickey gives you any lip about dealing with numbers in his classroom, send him over to Mathmagic Land.”

“Thanks,” replied Donald and extended his hand for a handshake that the disembodied Narrator could not return. Donald chuckled to himself.

“Your welcome,” came the response, “and if I’m not mistaken, I believe it is time to get you back to school.”

A foggy mist began to form around Donald, and when it cleared, he was back at his desk in his classroom. Looking at the clock on the wall, Donald could see that it was nearing 6:00 am. He had spent all night in Writing Wonderland, or possibly sleeping at his desk. Whatever the case, it really did not matter. What did matter was that Donald could now see a reason for writing in his classroom. Even if he did not decide to team teach, he would use journals in his classroom and explore other reasons to have his students write. Also, he would go into his meeting with Mickey and Principal Von Drake with a much more open mind than before. Maybe that mouse wasn’t so stupid after all.