



Is Testing A Right-Brain Activity?

I have been reading "Drawing on the Artist Within" by Betty Edwards and thinking how it might help guide the future of software testing. During the first few chapters I discovered concepts related to testing strategies I use like the heuristic test strategy model, and session-based exploratory testing developed by James and Jon Bach; Just in Time Testing by Rob Sabourin; and Rapid Software Testing as taught by Michael Bolton.



Adam White

The beginning of this book on drawing describes Betty Edwards' method for teaching people to "see things differently," and draw what is "right in front of their eyes." The discussion focuses on the brain and its modes of operation, which most of us know as left-brain and right-brain thinking. Edwards prefers to call this L-mode and R-mode thinking to avoid arguments over exact locations in the brain and instead focus on the type of thinking.

L-mode thinking in Edwards' view, is the linear, logical, and language-based thinking most of us are used to. Do step 1 and then do step 2. Here is the algorithm, or set of rules, to solve this problem. Times up – it's time to stop. In this mode everything is explainable through definitions, and most importantly, the results need to be "logical." One doesn't need to look much further than our "modern" education system to see that this mode of thinking is dominant in our society.

R-mode thinking on the other hand, is the area of the brain that sees the whole picture, or gestalt of a given problem or situation. This mode doesn't seem to process thought in the linear way that L-mode does. It appears this thinking style

is more heuristic and searches to fit pieces of a system together in a way that doesn't fit easily with word based explanations. Think back to the skills you learned in music, art and drama class (if you had them). R-mode thinking often results in an "a-ha" moment after we've been chewing on a problem for a while.

Here is the connection to testing for me. In my own work I flip back and forth between the two styles of thinking. I often find myself in front a whiteboard drawing my understanding of systems to "get my ideas out where I can see them." This often leads to an a-ha moment for me. I make the strongest connections when I use a white board combined with the R-mode thinking of the heuristic test strategy model. I come up with a number of insights I'm sure would have otherwise remained hidden.

I also frequently use session based test management. This style of testing appears to incorporate both types of thinking. It has structure and process to please the L-mode brain. We can count "things" called sessions, keep track of time and do verbal reports of our findings with other testers. We also get the freedom to do R-mode thinking. We are allowed to

learn as we go, explore what we are seeing and apply it toward building a gestalt of the whole application. There is even a place to track this in the written session reports called opportunity testing. I have experience with SBTM and it works for me. I've seen others who struggle with it. Perhaps these struggles come up because we aren't used to actively engaging both styles of thinking. Perhaps we need some methods teach us how to look at things differently.

Edwards describes it best when she says that "[d]rawing, often considered a form of creativity, can provide actual evidence of such mental shifts: a drawing can show whether one brain mode was 'in charge' during the process of drawing, even though the person might be unaware that the drawing is being influenced by a particular mental set. I believe that learning to draw mainly requires learning to be aware of which brain mode is dominating and more important, learning to control mental shifts in brain mode. And I believe

these skills are also prime requisites for increasing creative-thinking abilities"

I fundamentally believe that testing is a creative activity. I also believe testers need to be aware of and learn from different styles of thinking and practicing their craft. After I read this quote I thought perhaps drawing or "learning to see things differently" might be a way to better testing. Let's consciously switch focus to learning and teaching R-mode activities, like those found in Edwards' book and the exercises in the rapid software testing course developed by James Bach and Michael Bolton. Both of these resources give us great ways to teach ourselves to tap all the creative powers inside our heads and simultaneously revamp our

testing education system. Can you imagine that? ☒

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Adam White is manager of PlateSpin, a data-center automation company.