

## Coaching Testers

In his short story “The Windows of Wonder”, Bryan McMahon’s young school teacher makes this analogy about her class:

*“Your minds are like rooms that are dark or brown. But somewhere in the rooms, if only you can pull aside the heavy curtains, you will find windows – these are the windows of wonder. Through these you can see the yellow sunlight or the silver stars or the many coloured wheels of a rainbow.”*

For me, education is a journey through lands of enquiry and discovery. It’s up to you where you go, what baggage you take (or leave behind) and who your traveling companion will be.

Coaching is one way to help you along your chosen path. In coaching it’s the tester in control, the coach is simply a conduit through which a tester can explore and discover the vast unknown territory that is testing.

The type of coaching I offer focuses on your testing ability. In traditional training, content is often based on terminology, process, and techniques. Aside from the Rapid Software Testing Courses and AST BBST courses, there’s little out there that I know of that focuses on tester skill.

This is because testing is hard to describe, let alone explain to someone else and so what ends up in most training courses is a focus on tangible outputs. Testing is described in terms of documents or a process. As many testers discover, this type of training lacks depth and is insufficient at making you better at testing. Test Scripts and Process have as much to do with testing as reading the rules of cricket is about being an expert cricket player.

Ah yes, cricket - the equivalent of a five day chess game. It’s relatively easy to learn the [basic rules](#). One person bowls a ball to another, who then hits it with a bat to try and score as many runs as possible (think baseball with a flat stick and only two bases).

Knowing how to bowl, that’s different. There is a real skill to bowling and many different ways to bowl. But be warned, if you straighten your arm while delivering a ball, this is bad and is called chucking.

Andrei my husband has been coaching my two boys on bowling. First he asks them to bowl for him, then then shows them how he bowls. He gets them to bowl again.

He steps in to point out where they can improve, praises them when they perform well and encourages them when they feel despondent.

Coaching testers requires a similar mix of activity, dialogue and encouragement.

To become a skilled and noteworthy tester you have to practice your skills. The coaching I offer helps you identify your testing skill and then improve on it through performing testing and through discussing the testing performed.

Tester skill and tester thinking are closely aligned. By understanding your thinking you can improve our testing ability.

In a coaching session, I give a tester a task or exercise to perform. I observe and question as they think through the task. I watch out for ideas they have about testing and the decisions they are making while they test. For example: how are you deciding what to test, or what's a bug? What assumptions are you making when testing? Is that a bad thing?

By doing this, I'm asking the tester to go beyond what they do on a daily basis and to think deeply about their testing. I'm do this for two reasons. The first is that only by understanding how you do something, can you improve on it.

But also, this type of thinking challenges your mind to work through ideas and concepts. If you have the courage to apply yourself and willing to reason through a problem, this type of 'applied thinking' can be used anytime in testing and can open up a treasure chest of testing ideas.

For me, coaching is also about nurturing, caring and understanding the tester. Caring enough to get to know them, their hopes and aspirations and being interested in their aspirations.

By now, you may have realised that my coaching has very little to do about me, and everything to do with the tester. What a tester learns and gets out of a coaching session is very much up to them.

When a tester wrestles through a task, questions and challenges their thinking and ends the session invigorated and empowered by what they have done, it can do wonders for their confidence and motivation.

I want to encourage and help testers discover how exciting testing can be. Through applying themselves to learning and discovery, how the windows of wonder the world of testing can open up.

But most important, its for you understand that you have the permission<sup>1</sup> to take control of what, when and how you learn, leaving you to charge off into the sunset, with new ideas that you have discovered, empowered by the learning that you took charge of.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://theamericanscholar.org/permission-givers/>