The Context-Driven Approach to Software Testing

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It depends” is a frustrating answer

- But we don’t (or shouldn’t) respect consultants who tell us to do the same things under all circumstances.
- Complex circumstances require tailored responses.
- The challenge is to figure out the relevant factors and how to deal with them in appropriate ways.
The Seven Basic Principles of the Context-Driven School

- The value of any practice depends on its context.
- There are good practices in context, but there are no best practices.
- People, working together, are the most important part of any project's context.
- Projects unfold over time in ways that are often not predictable.
- The product is a solution. If the problem isn't solved, the product doesn't work.
- Good software testing is a challenging intellectual process.
- Only through judgment and skill, exercised cooperatively throughout the entire project, are we able to do the right things at the right times to effectively test our products.
Example: Test Group Missions

- Find defects
- Maximize bug count
- Support a unit testing effort
- Block premature product releases
- Help managers make ship / no-ship decisions
- Help stakeholders translate their requirements into acceptance tests
- Minimize technical support costs
- Conform to regulations
- Minimize safety-related lawsuit risk
- Assess conformance to specification
- Find safe scenarios for use of the product (find ways to get it to work, in spite of the bugs)
- Verify correctness of the product
- Assess quality
- Assure quality
Example: Test Documentation

- How should we document our testing?
  - Common testing templates, based on IEEE Standard 829, call for very extensive documentation.
  - Should we follow the standard and generate all the paper? Ignore the standard?
  - Or should we decide on our project’s requirements, and adopt a documentation approach that meets our actual needs (which may or may not involve 829)?
Example: Test Documentation

- Common documentation requirements questions:
  - Will the documentation be a product or a tool?
  - Do you expect to need test documentation in lawsuits?
  - How quickly is the design changing?
  - How many tests are you trying to document?
  - Will you check test results against an oracle or against a planned result?
Example: GUI Regression Automation

- Will the user interface of the application be stable or not?
- To what extent are oracles available?
- To what extent are you looking for delayed-fuse bugs (memory leaks, wild pointers, etc.)?
- Does your management expect to recover its investment in automation within a certain period of time? How long? How easily can you influence these expectations?
Best Practices?

Rather than accepting an alleged best practice:

- Ask when and why a given practice would be beneficial?
- What risks and benefits are associated with it?
- What skills, documents, development processes, and other resources are required to enable the process?
A Best Practice?

- Should we *really* document every test case in writing and include an expected result?
  - When / why is this beneficial?
  - What are the risks and benefits?
  - What do you need to enable it?
  - When is this inappropriate?
Bad Practices?

- Sometimes, people will suggest practices that seem “obviously” bad.
  - You might (perhaps reasonably) conclude that the person is an idiot.
  - You might (more productively) ask why this practice seems useful to this person.
    - When would it be beneficial?
    - What are its risks and benefits?
    - What do you need to enable it?
    - When is it inappropriate?
An Obviously Bad Practice

- Let’s do personnel evaluation of testers by counting their bug reports.
  - When / why is this beneficial?
  - What are the risks and benefits?
  - What do you need to enable it?
  - When is this inappropriate?
We Must Reappraise

- Over the last 30 years, the context of our work has shifted dramatically
  - When I started programming (1967), 10,000 lines of code was a lot
  - In early 1980s, 100,000 lines was a lot
  - Now, we routinely crank out multi-million line systems
- Yet, many of the practices and approaches we recommend to testers today, and see on tester certification exams, are unchanged from the 1980’s.
Reappraisal (Some Thoughts)

- Study / train skills rather than practices.
- Build skills and experience in multiple areas, not just testing.
- Look for opportunities to collaborate technically with programmers (e.g. on testability or unit testing).
- Learn a wide range of testing techniques. Select and combine them appropriately for the project at hand. (see *Paradigms of Software Testing*, [www.kaner.com/pdfs/slides/paradigm.pdf](http://www.kaner.com/pdfs/slides/paradigm.pdf))
- Appraise the techniques you use (and the documentation you create) against the need to test massive systems. You may need to lighten your processes.
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