

# Weekend Engagement

**Fiona Charles**

© Fiona Charles 2009

I just spent the weekend with eighteen other engaged testers. Yes, that's right—I said the weekend. There should have been twenty of us, but one had bronchitis and was forced to stay home. She was bitterly disappointed.

## Toronto Workshop on Software Testing

This year, for the fifth time, my friend and colleague Michael Bolton and I co-hosted an annual peer conference called the Toronto Workshop on Software Testing (TWST). For two solid weekend days, we made presentations and held intense and lively facilitated discussions on our experiences with the topic “How to Coach/Train/Mentor Software Testers.” Many of us dined together Friday and Saturday and talked about testing then, too.

It was a blast. As always, I was profoundly impressed by the depth and breadth of my colleagues' experience and the insight with which they present and discuss it.

Tired of the limitations of one-hour conference sessions, we started TWST in 2005, basing it on LAWST™—the Los Altos Workshop on Software Testing—founded by Cem Kaner and Brian Lawrence, and itself based on a particular kind of academic conference. The model is simple. A small group of committed people gets together for both days of a weekend to explore in depth a single topic central to software testing. In previous years, we've discussed:

- Testing and Agile
- Test Modeling
- Risk-based Testing
- Deception and Self-Deception on Software Projects

Conference attendance is by invitation only, since we want to ensure a high level of participation and commitment. For the same reason, we keep the conference small, with a maximum of twenty participants in any session. TWST is free, although out-of-town participants pay for their own travel and accommodation.

Each participant must come prepared to present informally and briefly on his or her experience with the topic.

There's no set agenda. As the “content owner,” I ask for and review abstracts of each presentation beforehand. Then, during the conference, I dynamically order the presentations to pursue or contrast with themes emerging from the discussions. The session is facilitated by a single volunteer or by one of the participants in turn. We don't take formal minutes, although sometimes participants offer to share their notes.

Especially on the first day, we don't limit discussion after a presentation, only ending when participants have exhausted all the discussion threads. Consequently, although

thirty minutes is the maximum allowance for each presentation, we rarely get through more than three presentations on Saturday. Typically, those initial presentations and discussions lay out most of the essential points on the session topic. On the second day, I work with the facilitator to timebox both presentations and discussions--often to fifteen minutes each. Near the end, we may move to even shorter lightning talks to ensure that everyone gets a chance to present.

Like LAWST™ workshops, TWST's purpose is twofold. Principally, we want to provide an intensive opportunity for experienced Canadian test practitioners who are both passionate and thoughtful about their work to get together and share their experiences and insights. Secondly, we want to help move thinking about testing forward.

We encourage participants to publish TWST discussions and findings, if there are findings. The only restriction is that the author must credit the TWST conference for a given session, as well as all of its participants, in the publication.

Above all, TWST is fun and inspiring--and TWSTers keep coming back for more.

I know of several LAWST™-inspired peer conferences in different locales in the US, UK, and India. Two pairs of TWST 5 attendees plan to start conferences in their own cities. But these represent only one model of an event where testers can grow by sharing and practicing their craft.

## **Weekend Testers**

I recently learned about an entirely different model invented by a wonderfully creative group of friends who call themselves the Weekend Testers (WT; formerly the Bangalore Weekend Testers).

Some time ago, eager to practice and enhance their exploratory testing skills, Parimala Shankaraiah, Sharath Byregowda, Ajay Balamuragadas, and Manoj Nair began doing a loosely organized form of peer testing in their spare time. Eventually, they developed a more structured approach and invited others to join WT in regular weekend tests of open source software products.

Here's how WT works. First, the organizers line up candidate products for WT to test, looking for variety, complexity, an element of surprise—anything that will throw testers out of their comfort zone. For a product to qualify, its developer must first agree both to having it tested and to publication of the resulting test reports and bug reports.

Each week, testers register via the WT email account to participate in the coming weekend's session. So far, they've had as many as fourteen testers in a session. Testing is scheduled for one hour, starting at 3:00 p.m. Saturday. An hour before the session begins, the facilitator announces the open source software product to be tested. Participants join an online chat program at 2:30 p.m.

One of the four organizers acts as facilitator for a session, each of which has a mission such as “find functional bugs in this product” or “find problems limiting testability.” The facilitator announces the mission, and testing begins. Testers are free to choose the

components or features they want to work with. They work from their own homes, interacting via online chat as they do exploratory testing of the product.

After testing, everyone stays on for an hour to share experiences. The facilitator leads a discussion about approaches taken, challenges encountered, bugs found, and other learnings from the test.

To wrap up, the facilitator prepares an experience report with a list of participants, a bug summary, and a description of the oracles and heuristics used and publishes it on the WT site within twenty-four hours after the session ends.

To date, WT has run nine sessions, testing the open source products VisCheck, TinyURL, WireMaster, Freemind, Google Calendar, TuxPaint, Bing Maps, Areca Backup, and SplashUp. They've had positive feedback from the product developers, three of whom have provided testimonials praising WT's work.

Like TWST, WT is multipurpose. The organizers want to provide a challenging and fun opportunity for exploratory testers to practice on types of products they may not encounter in their regular work. They want to serve the community in other ways, too. WT testing helps open source developers make their products better for all of us. And, WT wants to propagate their idea to help the testing community, with WT chapters of passionate testers in different locales. Already, another WT group has sprung up in Chennai, and the original organizers are mentoring the new group.

Talking to the WT organizers, I was bowled over by their energy and enthusiasm, not only for testing and learning, but for serving the community. They're having a lot of fun becoming better exploratory testers, and they're also learning about human interactions, sharing, communication, and facilitation.

## **Do You Have Plans for the Weekend?**

If you're interested in starting a similar weekend group, here are some resources:

- The Association for Software Testing offers help and facilitator training for people interested in organizing LAWST™ workshops. See the AST site <http://www.associationforsoftwaretesting.org> for details.
- You can read more about TWST (based on, but not actually a LAWST™ workshop) on my Quality Intelligence website [www.quality-intelligence.com/TWST.htm](http://www.quality-intelligence.com/TWST.htm).
- For more about Weekend Testers, see the Weekend Testing site [www.weekendtesting.com](http://www.weekendtesting.com).

TWST and WT represent two complementary models for engaged testers to learn, practice and discuss various elements of the testing craft on the weekend. I'm sure creative testers can come up with all sorts of other models!