

Active vs. Passive Thinking

By Arlo Vance

There is a two-part pattern in thinking that has allowed me to develop “good thinking.” The first is by actively participating in the thinking process through writing and drawing. The second is more passive and elusive. It may even seem to be “unthinking.”

Thinking is a large part of the unseen work designers do to develop engaging, appropriate and award-winning work. During a redesign of my website I was thinking about what I wanted to say about my process. There was a moment of realization where two ideas seemed to connect to open a more broad view of that process. It is rare that these occasions happen so I figured writing down my conclusions would be helpful, not only to confirm my thoughts, but also to make more connections.

Many young designers believe that good ideas come by inspiration or just magically appear; and that only a select few strike the perfect idea. This phenomenon seems evasive until further investigation into the process of thinking. It is true that some are able to capture good ideas more often, but those people have learned through experience that good ideas come from good thinking.

Through my inquiry into thinking I have identified a two-part pattern in thinking that has allowed solid ideas to be developed more successfully. The first is by actively participating in the thinking process. Actions we initiate that lead to idea development, such as writing, sketching, talking, reading, actively engage our brains in making connections. These types of activities are the foundation for active thinking. I have found that when I doodle or write, I am more able to make my ideas concrete and understandable. This process often leads to surprising results, sometimes totally unrelated to the immediate problem I am trying to solve.

Another essential part of active thinking is that during the process, a hard copy reference point is created for future projects or improvements to previous ideas. Most designers use a sketchbook as this reference. I have laid out my sketchbook to optimize the active thinking process for me. It contains separate areas for writing and drawing that allow me to keep my thoughts more organized than a muddled mass of words and images.

The second part is more passive and elusive. It may even seem to be “unthinking.” Passive thinking often comes when we least expect it. Some may call it inspiration, others luck or intuition. Whatever its label, the results are the same—an instant where our brains have made a connection between two seemingly disconnected ideas. Most often there is no deliberate action taking place to think in this way. These moments sometimes materialize in daydreams, at the gym, or while traveling. There is more going on during the moments when we seem to not think at all than when we are actively thinking. Meditation, sleeping and daydreaming provide respite from the strain of active thinking and balance the process. Complete distraction may also be a form of passive thinking. If we focus on something totally unrelated to the problem at hand we often re-approach it with new insights.

Once the right balance between active and passive thinking has been struck the ideas start pouring out. Then its just a matter of finding the most appropriate idea, which is another skill altogether.

