

## The Yin and Yang of Formal and Informal Learning

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Today, the buzz is about informal learning. Are your programs informal? Are they as informal as you want them to be? In this article we question those questions. Instead we urge consideration of both informal and formal methods, favoring conscious decisions that deliver an intentional mix of the formal and informal, of the *yin* and the *yang*.

In the East, it is said that people who are yin are creative, passive and easy going. When they tend to lethargy, they are encouraged to become more yang. On the other hand, those who are yang are seen as active, precise, and controlled. They are nudged to strive towards yin. It is acceptable to never find balance between yin and yang, but instead to always seek, reflect, and add elements of the other.

In the West, we say yin and yang but often mean yin VERSUS yang, good VERSUS evil. We think there is some of that going on with formal and informal learning. People get heated, choose sides, affiliate with one way or the other, even debate the better form. If informal learning is the goal, do you know if it is appropriate for your organization and outcomes? Are your programs deliberately designed, resulting in selected informal and formal strategies?

Those questions are difficult to answer because informal and formal learning are not firmly situated in the lexicon. If your program was more informal—or formal, for that matter, what would it look like? On what do decisions about formality and informality depend? Let's look at three examples and an online tool devoted to the considerations that surround informal and formal learning.

### Three Questions

#### 1. What does success look like?

Begin with the end in mind—those words are a mantra in the training community. What would life in the learning organization be without defined ends? You could call it informal.

Let's meet Fred, Isabella and Mark and look at their outcomes. At one end of the continuum is Fred Formal. He manages training for a retirement unit in a financial services company. Fred has worked with subject matter experts to establish nearly four hundred objectives associated with the provision of high quality advice about retirement. Training then is devoted to helping retirement advisers certify on those outcomes. No wiggle room surrounds these outcomes. If you want a career as a retirement advisor at one of three levels of proficiency, you must prove you can pass tests based on the objectives. Speaking for the organization, verified by subject matter experts, and approved by regulators, Fred decides.

On the other end of the continuum sits Isabella Informal. She works for a university with a long, proud history of international programs. The new President tasks her with creating a program to encourage faculty to infuse international perspectives into their campus classes. Isabella and the President agree that faculty members are the best arbiters when it comes to deciding how to integrate international perspectives into their courses. Because she recognizes no single definition for an internationalized curriculum, Isabella relies on an informal approach.

Mark in the Middle is a learning executive for a government audit group. He and an advisory group affirm a core set of outcomes for which all are accountable. Beyond the required core, employees are urged to select and add goals congruent with their work challenges and the advancement of individual careers.

## **2. Do they choose?**

Yes, employees choose—to some extent in Mark’s realm, and of course, very much so in Isabella’s. At the heart of informal learning is this freedom to choose. Autonomy, no surprise, is double-edged, with some devoted to the program and others lackadaisical about it.

Such freedom can transform learning into a marketplace. Those who are responsible for the programs must devote themselves to delivering appealing experiences. Who would voluntarily study up on the irrelevant or boring? Who would return to page-turner e-learning, a punishing e-coach or an instructor who drones? Who would be devoted to an online community with few updates? Who wants to spend time figuring out a clunky portal or wandering to find the answer on a product web site?

Let’s return to Isabella. Isabella’s informal fare grows into a smorgasbord. She provides live links to videos and podcasts about international programs, past and present, points to sample curriculum, and urges students and faculty who are currently abroad to blog about their experiences. She sends out information about conferences devoted to such matters and offers funding for attendance. Faculty explore when, where, how and how much they choose, autonomy they favor. When asked if faculty are using these resources and actively enhancing their classes, aside from tallying requests for conference funding, Isabella admits she is not certain.

Fred the Formal decides how the retirement specialists will progress. They start with Retirement 101 and proceed to 301, directed on what to do and in what order. In addition to scheduled face-to-face classes, virtual classroom events, e-learning, and online knowledge bases, tests serve as gates throughout. Fred’s programs are well subscribed because they promise and deliver skills, knowledge and career mobility.

Mark in the Middle elects to offer a blended program, situated in the classroom and in the workplace, with alternative paths to achievement. He offers lessons and support delivered in many ways, including podcasts, virtual classroom experiences that are sliced, diced, tagged and archived, knowledge bases, and an e-coach. Mark selects most of the outcomes. They decide how they will get there.

### 3. Is the enterprise in a position to embrace informal approaches?

Informal learning make perfect sense for individuals like Stan who wants to mulch for the first time and Minjuan who is eager to polish her Mandarin. It is not the same for the enterprise.

The enterprise that gives the nod is charged with saying and sometimes proving what that nod signifies. What do we expect of a certificated food handler? What of a Boeing 777 plane mechanic? What is San Diego State University (SDSU) representing about a Bachelor of Arts with a major in Religious Studies? The food handler, mechanic, and Religion major do not decide. The state, Boeing, the airlines, regulatory bodies, and SDSU do. Each enterprise is making promises to customers, employees, regulators, and the public. You have to wonder-- if an entity really, truly commits to their promises, wraps its brand around these outcomes, can it be really, truly informal? Can the enterprise take a chance that the food handler or mechanic, even the Religion major, might be casual or careless about competence?

Isabella's program tolerates uncertainty. Will her informal program influence the faculty? What has Isabella built into the program to assure engagement and progress? Does Isabella know how international current classes are? Can she point to colleagues who are making steady progress through engagement with her curriculum? Can she find the laggards? What of the faculty who might wish to reflect on their progress at internationalizing their classes? How will they self-assess? How does her campus compare to others? Without data, how will Isabella improve her informal program?

To Isabella's surprise and faculty dismay, a college committee inserted a new question into the end-of-semester course evaluations soliciting student opinions about integration of international content. Students across the campus reported that 23% of their classes included some or much international content while 53% included none at all. The remaining students said that they were not certain. As soon as the evaluation forms appeared, faculty hits on Isabella's web site spiked. The President is pleased that professors are now showing interest in the initiative. He suggests that Isabella might perhaps apply for an award for their global offerings.

Mark's people are expected to demonstrate competence on the core outcomes. He tests through sample problems and occasionally observes based on a checklist. He also relies on regular feedback from the groups and people the auditors serve. Mark's program doesn't feel all that informal to the enterprise because key outcomes are set and measured in authentic ways.

Fred Formal's approach relies on tests and error rates. He works in a tightly regulated environment with objectives derived through systematic analysis and tests born of those objectives. When laws change, he works with subject matter experts to update the outcomes and the tests. That isn't about to change. It is how the enterprise and regulatory bodies require it to be.

## Mindful about formal and informal learning

Fred, Isabella and Mark are accountable to their organizations and their colleagues-- not to the Schools of Formality and Informality. Their devotion is to design not designations, to performance not purity.

Are Fred, Isabella and Mark executing with a rich slate of possibilities in mind? Have they chosen systematically? Have they questioned habits and examined options? Has Mark, for example, selected his balanced approach or did he stumble into it? Is Fred delivering a program that he designed or one that he inherited? Do Fred, Isabella and Mark know where they stand on informal and formal learning-- and where they aspire to go?

Do you?

We created a small tool, something we call YinYang, to encourage mindfulness about informal and formal strategies. The goal is awareness derived from knowledge about the yin and the yang of informal and formal learning.

- **Look at the yin and yang within your current approaches.**

This is an opportunity to examine these two perspectives on learning and performance. Start with the formal. Explore the Yin column in the table below for a list of informal approaches. Any new approaches on the Yin list? Any you would add? Are you using most, some or few of these approaches? Next, explore the Yang column for its suggestions about more structured strategies. Is this how learning typically works in your enterprise? Are you doing most, some or few of these strategies?

Ways to add informality and YIN to your efforts	Ways to add formality and YANG to your efforts
Give them more choices about what they learn and how they learn it	Measure if participants have learned what they are supposed to learn
Provide them with access to a wide variety of resources that they can browse, select, use, adapt	Measure the efficiency and efficacy of learning programs
Create ways for them to themselves add to the resources	Proliferate institutional knowledge through the coordination and delivery of physical and virtual learning events
Help learners identify and connect with peers and distant experts who possess know-how	Drive learners to an organized central repository, such as an LMS, for access to institutional wisdom, including outcomes, curricula, learning events and self-paced resources
Encourage communities, online and in person, to encourage discussion and collegiality	Schedule events, such as podcasts and virtual classes, that spread authenticated messages
Provide ways for them to compare and discuss their efforts and knowledge	Require the use of centrally managed content for on-the-job learning and support
Define success as interest, effort, contribution, conversation, appreciation and inquiry	Define what it is that great performers know and do and seek to spread those competences, habits and perspectives
Prepare line leadership for learning characterized by authentic, lively experiences more than	Assess the individual on required competencies and define sequential paths to mastery

established outcomes	
Encourage the conversations that turn false starts and mistakes into learning	Stress the importance of correct performance and the high cost and impact of errors
Support unexpected benefits that come through debate, experimentation and trial by error	Demonstrate to line leadership how learning and development efforts provide value to the organization
Adjust to accept reduced enterprise control and to tolerate not being certain what they are learning, sometimes if they are learning at all	Align employees to the use of standard procedures, content and processes
Encourage supervisors to model continuous and free form learning and to their people to experiment and choose	Align supervisors as teachers and mentors, active in advancing organizational messages and providing guard rails for far-flung employees
Applaud active participation in internal and external communities	Facilitate, monitor and moderate exchanges of information through communities, online or in person

- **Talk about these approaches with colleagues and customers.**

Are your efforts more formal or informal? Are you pleased with where the preponderance of your strategies reside? Any surprises here for you and the customers and clients you serve?

Are you inclined towards yin or yang or do you favor strategies associated with both? Do any particular strategies appeal to you? On which list do those favored strategies reside? What interests your colleagues and customers? Are these preferences appropriate for your situation and requirements? Most of all, the YinYang tool helps you think about the question of suitability.

- **Rely on the YinYang tool to consider the factors that drive design.**

Please visit the [YinYang tool](http://yinyang.frankn.net) (<http://yinyang.frankn.net>). If you have a smartphone, you may also access the mobile-enabled tool by scanning the QR code below.

[Insert QR code about here.]

Begin by reporting on your aspirations. Now that you have examined yin and yang options and chatted with colleagues, in which direction are you inclined? Select that option at the top of the tool.

Then, with your enterprise and a particular project and audience in mind, answer fifteen questions. We inquire, for example, about the certainty of your outcomes, your trust in employees' commitment to learning, current approaches, and the need for proof about skill before employees take the field to tackle the task.

As you consider the fifteen questions, invite the opinions of others. Is your target audience likely to seek lessons and information on their own? How important is it that your people lean on

each other for learning and development? Can you rely on your people to make good, independent decisions about their growth?

When you have responded to the fifteen questions, select the Submit button. The YinYang tool looks at the alignment between the approach that attracts you and your current circumstances, a situation reflected in the ways you answered the fifteen questions. In some cases, the tool will confirm your dispositions and offer a list of related approaches. In others, it will suggest that you stand pat. The tool also links back to the assessment and provides you with an option to print the findings.

### **Recommendations for Isabella, Fred and Mark**

Adding a single item to the course evaluation has rocked Isabella's world and she is now more open to formal strategies. This stance is supported by the YinYang tool. She examines the Yang table and decides to add an information curator, a professor who is experiencing success at adding international perspectives to her classes. This curator will refresh materials and communicate with colleagues to seek their concerns and successes. The curator might establish a faculty committee to come up with a self-assessment device, something to help individuals track their progress. Might Isabella and the curator create an online form to capture the lessons learned by professors who are attending conferences and altering their course offerings? Her improvements are devoted to providing faculty with a diverse and defined view of how international classes work.

The YinYang tool confirms Fred's reliance on formal approaches. He could be complacent, but he is not. Instead, his awareness of the formality of his program encourages him to consider informal strategies. He identifies possibilities in the Yin table.

Fred reflects on the benefits that community, collegiality and conversation might bring to his specialists as they prepare for certification tests. Now, Fred's participants are students OR graduates. The enterprise would profit from a culture that brings together current and former participants.

If Fred wants his people to establish lifelong learning habits, something important in a business that is competitive and volatile, he should think beyond singular reliance on testing memorized material. He decides to distinguish between what they must know by heart and what they can seek as needed. Testing might take two forms, unaided, as it is currently, and aided by access to knowledge bases.

Mark favors a balanced approach, favoring no one way or the other. The tool urges him to look for more informal means to support the auditors. What most interests Mark is what will strengthen the auditors' performance in regions across the country. He decides to deliver advice and updates on smart phones. He is particularly interested in experimenting with location based services that will tailor advice to state requirements too. Is he becoming more informal, as the tool suggests? Mark is too busy to worry about the label.

## Yin AND Yang in the enterprise

Thought leaders Bob Mosher, Jane Hart, Jay Cross and Roger Schank carry the flag for informal learning. Roger Schank posted this to his blog on June 20, 2011: "At some point people, and by this I mean school boards, governments, universities, and average citizens have to get over the idea that there should be any requirements at all in school." Jay Cross compared informal with formal approaches, "Informal learning is effective because it is personal. The individual calls the shots. The learner is responsible. How different from formal learning, which is imposed by someone else."

Most of the workplace learning that is recognized in the enterprise is formal. While we're not here to carry a flag for it, we recognize why it is the way it is, why requirements, specifications and defined curriculum characterize practice. It's no surprise that advocates of informal learning so strongly advocate for change, for moving the ball up a steep organizational hill.

What we have done here is endorse thoughtfulness about both informal and formal learning. This, we hope, yields tailored programs that suit the opportunity and organization and result in a mix of elements from both camps. Highly motivated engineers who confront gnarly problems? Incline towards the informal—but not only the informal. Intensely regulated financial services? Incline towards the formal—but not only the formal. A firm concerned with efficiency and regulated certainty? Incline towards the formal—again, not exclusively. Complaints and avoidance from participants? Of course, the best approach is a mishmash of yin and yang, with choice and human touch to engage and a defined core curriculum to reduce uncertainty.

Al Bird said, "Informal learning is, by nature, elusive." What we've tried to do here is to make it a bit less so, and to turn contemporary enthusiasm for informal approaches into thoughtful design, and better programs and participant experiences.                   ##

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Figure 1

