

Learning for agility, with agility

How a leading Greek business school redesigned its executive programmes to reflect and respond to today's rapidly changing environment. By **Kostas Axarloglou** and **Marina Gryllaki**



In a disruptive and non-linear world, where the present is drastically different from the past, what is important or meaningful or valuable today will not be so tomorrow.

Companies need to develop competencies in order to be adaptive to this continuously evolving environment and management tactics and insights can help business leaders to lead their organisations into new and uncharted territories.

At the same time, executives need to comprehend – fast and effectively – complex economic and social patterns. They need the skills and competencies that allow them to learn something in one situation and apply it in a different one; to gather patterns from one context and use them in another to make sense of something they have not seen or done before.

“Learning agility” is pivotal. Learning should be dynamic and continuous and learners need to develop a mindset and attitude for “perpetual” learning.

Managing with agility leads successful companies through the era of disruption; and learning how to manage with agility becomes a focal point of business school curricula and executive development offerings, not only as a theme but also as a competence and a learning imperative.

In response to these challenges and building on a blend of academic excellence and business relevance, ALBA has developed a portfolio of disruption-centred programmes. In particular, ALBA Executive Development has created a series of agility-related programmes with a focus on organisational, management and leadership competencies.

Over the last few years, ALBA has effectively been disrupting its own learning models and approaches by developing a “Learning Agility Map” that addresses learning agility in a multifaceted and multi-dimensional approach that assists learners to develop a new mindset and a key capability in order to navigate through disruption.

The Learning Agility Map conceptualizes a learning programme as a “learning journey” that consists of different milestones combined with diverse venues, stimuli and landmarks. *Exploration, Discovery, Design, Appreciation, Reflection* and

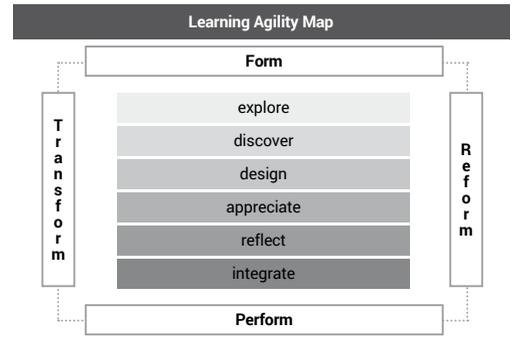


Figure 1: Alba Executive Development

Integration are key milestones in the learning agility journey (See Figure 1).

- **Exploration:** the active engagement with new data, new information and new elements of knowledge.
- **Discovery:** the observation and immersion into divergent stimuli, the construction of meaning and the capture of new connections
- **Design:** the generation of content, the experimentation with new methods and the iteration of ideas in order to co-create the roadmaps to achieve unique expectations
- **Appreciation:** the seeking of new values, the perception of novel approaches and the inspiration to create something new
- **Reflection and Integration:** the integration of the learning mosaic, the sharing of the new knowledge and the exploration of ways that the new knowledge can ignite learners to form new meaning in order to transform themselves and their organisation.

The learning milestones are combined in order to guide learners to co-develop a unique learning mosaic with their co-learners, their professors and the stakeholders of the programme.

The learning venues and landmarks are carefully selected and blended in order to provide a fertile context within which learners have the opportunity to synthesise their learning elements into an interactive and interdependent learning entity.

In other words, each learning journey is designed as a learning entity in which content, context, learners, instructors and contributors fuse into a continuous learning approach, where learning *in action* is paired with learning *in motion*.

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A key milestone of the learning journey is to integrate learning into ways that empower executive participants to explore new forms in order to transform and reform their organisations

Naturally, the underlying risk is that fusion may often lead to repetition, generic approaches and confusion. Thus, the focus and the challenge in each programme is to ignite learning through an *Extensive Learning Ecosystem* developed specifically for each learning journey.

The notion of a “Learning Ecosystem” is not new to the area of learning and development since it is linked to strategic learning and it refers to the collection of people, programmes, tools and processes that support learning within an organisation or provide learning offerings to other organisations.

Each learning journey within an “Extensive Learning Ecosystem” evolves in innovative, non-linear ways by building the learning milestones of the programme in collaboration with academics, experts, professionals and stakeholders from diverse industries, sectors and functions interconnecting different venues and landmarks and encouraging the learners to interact with experts and to navigate along different dimensions of learning.

Finally, a key milestone of the learning journey is to integrate learning into ways that empower executive participants to explore new forms in order to transform and reform their organisations.

The design and development of each Extensive Learning Ecosystem is a complex process since it includes an exploration for the programme-specific learning stimuli and venues, intensive experimentation, a solid understanding of diverse functions, and an elaboration on the creation and customisation of a learning entity that will offer valuable connections.

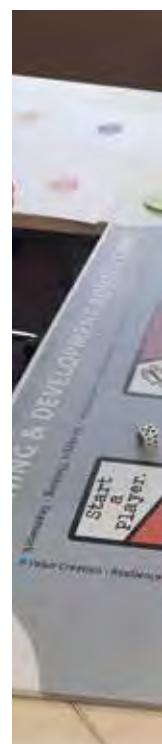
In a context of non-linearity, the above includes a capacity to connect rather than align the different dots and stages of the learning journey and to provide a meaningful and coherent flow. This also entails a portfolio of alternative learning options, since the learning ecosystem is a live ecosystem where disruption and distraction may occur.

**Below:**

*Figures
by George Lappas (1950-2016)*

The three dimensional constructions can be rearranged in different ways in order to render a sense of motion and volatility. The figures are constructed in order to be able to reshape constantly and manifest their extensive potential for transformation.

*Source: Contemporary
Greek Art Institute*





PICTURES COURTESY OF ALBA GRADUATE BUSINESS SCHOOL

Learning Agility in action / The FinTech Trek

Addressed to senior executives of a large Greek bank, this programme was delivered in London, the international FinTech capital. Based on a specifically developed Extensive Learning Ecosystem, the learning itinerary included open and digital banking masterclasses with ALBA visiting faculty, visits and lectures at FinTech hubs and innovation spaces, Bank masterclasses and field visits.

The learning mosaic extended from basic knowledge to cutting-edge theory, latest trends, and experts' insights on the challenges and the future of FinTech and discussions on the bank's FinTech challenges.

Feedback, evaluations, discussions and post learning assessments with the executive participants, HR partners, and organisational stakeholders indicate that the learning programmes had a beyond ordinary influence, impact and learning outcomes.

The blend of the learning milestones that unfolded within carefully selected contexts and gave new forms to the learning landmarks, led participants to navigate across the Learning Agility Map to interact with the diverse learning elements and to develop the mindset and the mind tools for learning agility.

But what differentiates these learning journeys from a typical experiential trip and an ordinary learning ecosystem? What does the transition to extra-ordinary learning entail for executive education? And what does the design of the extensive learning ecosystem entail for the role of Executive Development?

- The depth of content of academic knowledge is of key importance. Each learning programme is directed by an academic co-ordinator/expert who, in designing the Extensive Learning Ecosystem, is actively involved in the selection of venues, partners and experts and who is able to attract top contributors due to his/her academic expertise. Upon completion of the preparation stage, the academic co-ordinator is able to connect and integrate all learning elements and to assist executive participants make reflections and take actions.
- The breadth of context is of significant importance and is the result of a co-creation between the academic co-ordinator, the

executive development unit and the customer organisation. However, breadth does not refer merely to a variety of context. It refers to richness and quality of context that needs to interact with the content and often creates new elements of learning.

- Disruption related methods and approaches: Adopting design thinking approaches and agile /scrum methods assist the executive education unit to understand the customer's needs, to experiment and iterate learning offerings and services, and to deliver the programmes with teamwork, empathy, agility and resilience.
- Interdisciplinarity: When orchestrated masterfully, interdisciplinarity offers a unique, fertile ground for learning agility, intellectual curiosity and convergence of learning.
- Authenticity, originality and a genuine passion for learning: When these key elements of learning agility are shared by stakeholders and contributors, they are diffused across the learning community and learning is transformed and elevated into a value that drives participants to explore, exploit and deploy learning in the digital era.

The value of the *Extensive Learning Ecosystem* lies in the ability of the Business School to *attract, combine* and *connect* excellence.

Renowned academics, industry experts and professionals are artfully united to contribute to an extra-ordinary learning offering.

"Knowledge is power", Francis Bacon's famous Enlightenment maxim, is always relevant. In a connected, digital and disruptive world, as knowledge exceeds itself in unexpected and unpredictable ways, learning agility evolves into an imperative competence for learners, business executives and business schools as well. In the digital Enlightenment era, learning is timely but also timeless: "Learning is power".



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