

# THE DISAPPEARING CLASSROOM

**Michael Desiderio** describes how new technology is knocking down the walls of the Executive MBA

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Expectations of today’s business leaders are higher than ever, including the intense pressure to make profits appear in less time with fewer resources. So when they turn to a business school or similar to bolster their leadership knowledge and help them meet those lofty expectations, they are looking for flexibility and, more importantly, immediate relevance.

Executive MBA (EMBA) programmes were born from the desire for flexibility – as an option for working professionals to earn their MBA – and the current marketplace trends, once again, are demanding innovations and novel solutions from EMBA providers. Fuelled by technology, many of those innovations and new solutions are leading to a new phenomenon – the disappearing classroom.

What does the disappearing classroom look like? It is one whose boundaries are no longer defined by location or, in some cases, even walls. It is one where, more than ever, students learn by doing and where the time between acquiring knowledge and using it is dwindling rapidly.

The disappearing classroom manifests itself in a number of ways:

Formats of EMBA programmes continue to evolve. For example, students in EMBA with modular formats meet less regularly but for longer periods. According to research from the Executive MBA Council, the worldwide association of EMBA programmes, the percentage of EMBA that meet weekly dropped from 34% in 2008 to 26.7% in 2012 while the percentage of programmes that meet less than once a month has risen from 10.3% in 2008 to 14.3% in 2012.

EMBA providers are exploring different formats and different combinations of formats. And EMBA students are benefiting as a result. The increasing flexibility of formats makes it easier for working professionals to fit a programme into their busy lives. Now EMBA students can live and work almost anywhere in the world and benefit from EMBA programmes either near them or accessible to them.

The Executive MBA Council hosts a website ([www.executivemba.org](http://www.executivemba.org)) comparing EMBA programmes by geography, programme focus, start time, length and cost. The website also provides additional details about the EMBA that allow side-by-side comparison.

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Technology is changing the landscape and supporting the development of new options for programme delivery. Many EMBA programmes, especially global ones, rely on distance learning technology for some aspect of classes. Collaboration software and “boardroom” style formats help bring teams with members from different parts of the world together, as does teleconferencing, web conferencing or Skype. Virtual environments are offering new vehicles for learning.

EMBA programmes are also increasing their use of electronic materials, helping lighten the load for students who travel. Students no longer need to worry about leaving a course pack at home. According to EMBA Council research, in 2012 members reported supplying almost a third – 28.9% – of materials electronically, more than double 2010’s percentage.

In addition, EMBA programmes are increasingly exploring the world of digital textbooks. Several have already made the transition and others are investigating the option.

In many cases, digital textbooks are more than just books available on devices or online – they are actually new learning tools that incorporate multimedia – video, podcasts and other interactive components.

And as universities throughout the world are contributing massive open online courses (MOOCs) with top faculty to platforms such as Coursera and edX, EMBA programmes are asking themselves some tough questions: is this the format of the future for core MBA courses? Will EMBA students like MOOCs? How might they affect programme delivery?

Interactions are coming in new shapes and sizes. Thanks to technological advances, the innovations in format are resulting in broader and richer opportunities for business leaders to interact with one another, the heart of peer learning.



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In 2012, according to the EMBA Council, the top destinations for international trips were China, North America and Brazil with India, Argentina, Hong Kong and Chile also popular as locations



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EMBA students in New York may find themselves participating in a global team with students from Asia and London. EMBA students also may participate in online study groups or use social media tools to make connections.

Almost universally, interactions in EMBA programmes expose students to the global business world. Of course, those interactions also take place in traditional EMBA classrooms and through courses that incorporate a global perspective.

But global interactions also occur through international trips, international projects and international teams. According to the EMBA Council, the top destinations for international trips in 2012 were China, North America and Brazil with India, Argentina, Hong Kong and Chile also popular as locations.

In addition to visits, programmes are also including opportunities for EMBA students to work on international projects and collaborate with peers and local businesses while they are visiting these countries.

Because EMBA students hold full-time positions with managerial responsibilities, they are in a great position to learn a concept one day and apply it the next. While EMBA programmes have always been designed for applied learning, they are moving that notion to new levels as students participate in projects with real-life impacts, tackle problems within their own organisations, explore the viability of entrepreneurial ventures or consider solutions to global business issues.

These projects help benefit many businesses and organisations, as well as contribute to the public good. For example, one group of EMBA students helped expand foster care for young adults in their state. The students developed partnerships and conducted outreach with non-profits, the business community and the legislature. In the end, they contributed to the passage of new legislation that supports young adults in the community.

Whether resulting in legislation, increased revenues, new product development ideas, increased efficiencies or other outcomes, these projects demonstrate the powerful impacts that happen when EMBA students put their new knowledge and skills to use.

A number of EMBA students come to their programme with an interest in entrepreneurship and many EMBA programmes offer unique opportunities for entrepreneurs or budding entrepreneurs.

EMBA students tap the expertise of their peers, faculty and even professional venture capitalists as they develop business plans. A number of EMBA programmes sponsor courses and events where top business plans qualify for venture funding.

It may not quite be time to say “bye, bye” to the traditional classroom but it is certainly time to say “hello” to the classroom of the future.

EMBA programmes have, and always will, include that magic component of time together in one way or another. But the disappearing classroom – one that is bounded less by geography, expanded by technology, influenced by developments such as MOOCs and based on immediate relevance and the personal and professional transformations that strengthen the ability of business leaders to respond to rapidly changing times – is here to stay.

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#### FURTHER INFORMATION

The Executive MBA Council currently includes more than 200 educational institutions that administer over 300 Executive MBA programmes worldwide ([www.embac.org](http://www.embac.org), [www.executivemba.org](http://www.executivemba.org))

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Desiderio is executive director of the EMBA Council, overseeing Council programmes and services and collaborations with related educational associations and organisations throughout the world.