



Brandon Hall Group
**EXCELLENCE
AT WORK**

Interview

with **Ben Lowell**,
Strategic Advisor,
Class Technologies

Keeping the Human Connection
in a Hybrid Learning Environment

About Class Technologies

Class Technologies is a live virtual learning platform that supports face-to-face learning at scale, enabling employees to learn with and from each other in context-rich, active learning experiences. With collaboration, engagement and reporting tools, Class reinvents virtual learning to drive meaningful outcomes to employees and create business impact. Founded in 2020 by education software pioneer Michael Chasen, Class Technologies is headquartered in Washington, DC, with staff around the world.

Recognition

Class Technologies is a Brandon Hall Group Gold Preferred Provider and won three Excellence awards in 2021.



The Brandon Hall Group Preferred Provider Program is specifically designed as a single source of truth that can validate your technology selection decisions.

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About Ben Lowell



Ben Lowell is a corporate learning strategist, digital workplace expert and part-time music composer and actor. He has extensive experience in Learning and Development and began his career as a facilitator and instructional designer at Fidelity Investments. He then moved into public education, where he taught Spanish in seventh through ninth grades and helped develop a language curriculum for his school district. He later returned to corporate learning, first as the director of eLearning and then as Director of L&D at the Larry H. Miller Group of Companies, where he designed and delivered eLearning solutions for various businesses. Ben eventually shifted to learning technology and worked within strategy, sales and customer success at Instructure, Pluralsight and now, Class Technologies. Ben is devoted to the concept of lifelong learning and learning as a process, not an event.



About Rachel Cooke

Rachel Cooke is Brandon Hall Group's Chief Operating Officer and Principal HCM Analyst. She is responsible for business operations, including client and member advisory services, marketing design, annual awards programs, conferences and the company's project management functions. She also leads Advancing Women in the Workplace and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives, research and events. Rachel worked in the HCM research industry for 20+ years and held several key management and executive positions within the Talent and Learning Research, and Performance Improvement industries.

Q RACHEL

What are some of the trends and innovations you're seeing now and what do you anticipate will stick around for a long time?

A BEN

I'll start with virtual classrooms. When I worked at Fidelity Investments about 15 years ago, virtual learning was just coming onto the scene. We had a lot of remote employees in different locations, so there was an effort to train a larger quantity of employees more effectively. At the time, I thought this would change the world, including how we learn and communicate. And while those tools filtered into some universities and organizations for training and distance learning, they didn't take hold across most businesses. It was a niche tool for online universities and some professors, and it became helpful in some training instances. However, I think most people were still focused on in-person learning and asynchronous eLearning.

Fast forward 10 years: We're in the pandemic and companies are forced to be all remote. Employees everywhere work in their homes and are not allowed to come into the office — and that's still the case in some instances. The need became dire and companies shifted their training to online. For those not doing it before, it was a 100% transition. Others had some online presence but were forced to do 100% of their

learning in a virtual environment. We're never going to get rid of virtual classrooms — they're here to stay.

Businesses changed their expectations regarding where their employees live and how they work. Hybrid work is now available in many companies and the world that we live in will stay hybrid; meaning some people will be at home, some will be at remote offices and some will be in physical locations. That will be the new nature of work for almost every company. Companies that require people to be in-person, like a factory or store, will have a lot of their administrative staff take the option to be remote. The nature of work today will continue to spur innovation in the future.

Q RACHEL

How has this impacted the learning culture?

A BEN

It forced leaders, especially executive leaders who have been around a while, to see the validity of virtual learning. In many cases, it's better economically, more feasible and easier to scale across a large organization. Leadership has fully bought into that concept across most companies we've worked with.

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It's not just learning leaders who are wondering if they should do remote learning. Many leaders say, "We want to continue remote learning because it's easier to scale." That doesn't mean remote learning will replace all instances of in-person learning. There will continue to be a blended modality where you can scale learning faster in a virtual environment, then reserve those in-person learning opportunities for critical times. You save money, time and a lot of productivity hours. Plan for when it's crucial to be in-person and when you can do things in a remote setting.

Q RACHEL

What are some of the technologies that encourage peer learning, coaching and performance?

A BEN

First and foremost, you have a broad range of communication tools. You've got instant-messaging tools such as Slack. You've got web-conferencing tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and GoToMeeting. You also have other tools that can support asynchronous learning activities. With all those tools combined, you can have a lot of organic experiences in learning. Our company is 100% remote, which

opens the doors to hiring anybody anywhere. We have a lot of opportunities for hiring and bringing in diverse talent and experience. For example, if you have a remote group of 20 new hires at your company, they're not physically present very often. How will you make sure that they feel connected to their team? The more opportunities we have to connect to our team, the better that experience can be enhanced.

Old strategies of designing learning haven't changed; you must be way more intentional. As a live facilitator, when I was in a training room with many people, I had the luxury of seeing them face-to-face, seeing what they were doing and I could read their body language. I could see if people were getting tired or losing focus. It was very easy to monitor that at a small scale. If you go beyond 20 people in a physical space, it starts to become challenging. Twenty was my max, but if you get 30, 40, 50 or 60 people in a room, it's much harder to manage their learning and help make sure everybody is on track and focused.

In a virtual setting, it's much harder to make sure you're engaging their interest and there's interactivity because I can't see what they're doing with their computer or their phone. If they have a virtual background, I can't see where they are. Sometimes, their cameras are off entirely, so I don't even see their face. I can't read their body language. It becomes extremely challenging to track the real-time engagement of your participants in a virtual room. That's why you must be intentional and strategic about designing your learning.

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I used to teach junior-high students and I would change up activities every 5 to 7 minutes. In my experience, adults aren't that much different when it comes to staying focused and paying attention. I love to change something up every 5 to 7 minutes in how I'm delivering content and how the training is structured. When it comes to virtual learning, the software doesn't solve all your problems. You can have lousy training in-person and a bad training experience in a virtual setting. But if you have a good strategy going in, good people designing the learning and you add in the level of technology, that will enhance that. Just having technology doesn't solve your problems. You must be intentional about the design and how you use those technologies to answer the learning needs of your audience.

Q RACHEL

How important is it to get feedback before implementing your new program?

A BEN

Iterating is a critical component in the virtual space and it is forcing facilitators to be more strategic and thoughtful about how they design learning. I've been in too many training sessions and classes when I was in college where we sat for an hour and somebody would just talk to us. It's a very miserable learning experience

in most settings. No matter how engaging the speaker is, an hour is a long time for anybody to focus on speaking. If you've got training materials where people sit there for an hour, that is not a good experience in the physical space and it's even worse in the virtual space.

The concept of flipping the classroom has been around for a long time and it works in the virtual space. The reason is that the lecture you gave for an hour, you can easily record that, send it out to people and they can all watch it at their own pace at their own time. You can give them a quiz or some form of follow-up that they're required to do to make sure they capture that information. Instead of having them do that all in person and waste everybody's time and not get good engagement and outcomes, send that out in a different format. Let everybody consume it at their own pace, then bring them together to discuss it. Compliance topics can be so dry that it's hard to make them exciting and interesting. Instead, you send out a 30-minute to an hour-long presentation for an HR topic, people watch it, answer some questions, then come together as leaders to discuss how this works in the real world.

What is the application policy? We're going to create learning opportunities for the leaders in that room. If you're mixing experienced leaders with less-experienced leaders, they will have some cross-pollination of experiences and learn from each other through the dialogue and conversation. That can happen in a physical space or it could happen virtually if done right. It will improve the learning outcomes more than having everybody watch someone present an hour-long PowerPoint.

RACHEL

People are struggling right now with making live content. What can they make self-paced? How does that look?

BEN

You have the luxury of doing that now. Sometimes, I forget that as a learner, my most memorable learning opportunities happened when I was in a group of people and I had an idea of what I was hoping to get out of the content or the material. I had a plan; “this is what I want to do.” The facilitator had created a space where learning could happen, as opposed to thinking that the facilitator was the teacher and would teach everything to everybody. It created an environment where learning can occur and the discovery process is possible. I would go in as a learner, listen for things that I was interested in and focus on things that I knew I needed to work on. Because of that environment, the people around me and the learning opportunities, I would learn something very impactful. It was a self-discovery process. Learning is solidified when it’s self-propelled. When I stumble upon something that I just find revolutionary for me, that will stay with me and it will impact me more than anything that somebody else can give or show me. Self-discovery is the top tier of true learning that changes and impacts behavior.

Facilitators who are focused on, “how do we create an environment where people can learn for

themselves and grow?” — that’s who is winning and it’s a lot less of a presentation. A lot of times, the facilitator is not talking. The facilitators get out of the way. The Socratic method is so valuable in that space because it allows people to ponder, consider and evaluate what they need to learn and how it will change their behavior. Instead of thinking, “this is the learning outcome I want everybody to walk away with,” a more important and elevated status for learning is, “how do I create an environment where people will learn what they need to know?”

The learning outcomes for everybody can be slightly different, especially when we’re talking about people **skills**.



For example, I used to work at Pluralsight and the focus was on training engineers, IT administrators and AWS administrators. We were training very specific skills that you can learn, and there is a correct answer and there is a wrong answer. But when we’re talking about leadership, we’re talking about delivering and developing human skills. You must change that modality quite a bit and allow people to self-discover because everybody comes in with different gaps in their abilities. What they’re going to walk away with should be different. As a facilitator, it’s difficult for you to know what everybody needs to walk away with, so it’s better to formulate an environment where they can learn and self-discover. Then they’re going to get what they need instead of what I think they should get.

RACHEL

Is there any other advice you would offer a learning leader today to succeed in our environment?

learning experience does not need to be a lesser experience. Virtual and in-person learning can be just as effective if developed correctly with good people and a good strategy.

BEN

First, software won't solve your problems. I work for a software company, so it sounds counterintuitive, but software will not solve everything. You need intelligent people and a good strategy, then you need software to support those strategies and those people. Second, make sure that your people are adequately trained. We talk about training business, but we often forget about training our learning leaders; they need the training as well. They must continue to upskill and adapt. I saw certain teachers teaching junior high who taught the same way for 30 years and never adapted their style. That's not good, especially when our environment is constantly changing. Don't expect your learners to adapt to your style; you are the learning expert. You need to be able to adapt to your learners. You can't say, "this is the way I teach. If you don't like it, tough."

The best advice I can give is to continue to learn and develop your skills. In the virtual space, you have an excellent opportunity to learn new skills and techniques or refine former skills to translate more effectively into the virtual classroom. I've had some very effective training in the virtual space. It's not the only answer, but the virtual

Here are some ways to listen to the interview on Brandon Hall Group's Excellence at Work Podcast:



For additional information on this topic, check out our webinar with Class Technologies.

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About Brandon Hall Group

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