The Learning Rainforest – Tom Sherrington

1. Introduction

The analogy of the rainforest is used by Tom to describe effective and manageable teaching using a three-part structure:

- Establishing conditions – a root system tapping into a nutrient rich soil providing healthy conditions for growth.
- Building knowledge – a solid trunk providing the structure that allows the tree to reach great heights before branching off.
- Exploring possibilities – a canopy of leaves spreading out in different directions responding to a range of stimulus.

2. Plantation (Traditional/Structured) Vs Rainforest (Progressive/Creative)

Sherrington argues that a managed rainforest is the most appropriate metaphor. People are left to grow, be aspirational and take risks and when anyone is floundering leaders are walking the floor ensuring they are nurtured without imposing restrictions on others. At the same time, if anything is having a negative impact – an ineffective teacher, a dubious pedagogical practice, a bureaucratic policy, a disruptive student – action is taken to resolve the issue.

How do CPP leaders ensure that there are high expectations and rigour exists alongside trust and creativity?

3. What does the research say?

Sherrington acknowledges a consensus emerging in three categories:

- Climate – relationships, expectations and mind-sets all play an important role.
- Principles of Instruction – Pedagogical content knowledge, questioning, guided (modelling) and independent practice and effective formative feedback
- Memory and Building Knowledge – It’s important to give priority to teacher-led instruction that explicitly builds long-term memory.

How do CPP leaders support staff to achieve these three things within an exciting curriculum?

Sherrington also points out the importance for teachers to guide students from being a novice to an expert through knowledge acquisition. Teachers need to plan appropriate cycles of high-frequency, low stakes reviews that put knowledge at the forefront of the curriculum. If tests are low stakes, the very act of being tested has a positive learning effect. It is argued that high stakes tests and complex data tracking systems have little if any impact.

How do CPP leaders support staff to develop responsive teaching and focus on high quality feedback for all children?
4. **Assessment**

Instead of macro summative attainment tracking, Sherrington argues that we should focus on a model made up of the following elements:

- Maximum use of formative assessment – low stakes, high frequency testing / review owned exclusively by teachers and their students, focused on specific, clearly defined areas of knowledge and skill.
- Judicious use of summative assessments that support the leanest possible tracking.
- Responsive teaching, where feedback is informed by teacher-student relationships.
- Clear exemplars of excellence for a shared understanding of standards (Teaching Backwards / Ethic of Excellence).
- Lean marking approaches that acknowledge the limited effect marking has in relation to the demands it places on teachers.

How do CPP leaders support staff to deliver this kind of assessment model?

5. **Managing the Learning Rainforest**

Treat differentiation like gardening. Extract from the book:

You have a group of individual specimens with their own precise needs and qualities and your job is to get them to flourish. But, as with gardening, you often need to focus on one specimen at a time. You can’t do it all at once!

You may feel that Mo is coasting a bit; he needs a push this lesson. It may be that Tamara has looked a bit bored of late. She might be finding things a bit easy; so let’s really crank it up this lesson. The last time Ruby handed her book in it was a bit of a shocker; you’ll need to sit with her this lesson and get a few things sorted out. Harun is always just below the top level. Why is that? Is this an Austin’s Butterfly effect? Maybe he needs to do some redrafting and you need to absolutely insist that he does it again and again until he’s hitting the top level, truly delivering excellence.

That’s real differentiation: keeping standards high for everyone, trusting that most learners learn in broadly similar ways, teaching them as a whole group and then pushing, prodding, nudging, stretching ... slow, subtle, nuanced, a step at a time, working around the class from lesson to lesson where needed to the greatest extent you can manage. It’s not a performance you master each lesson; it’s something you grind out over the long, long run.

When monitoring provision, do CPP leaders look carefully for this responsive teaching?

6. **Establishing the Conditions**

A selection of key points for us to consider:

**C3 Rigour** – Sherrington identifies high levels of rigour as a key characteristic of great lessons. High quality teachers never settle for low level disruption, sloppy thinking, mediocrity, half-hearted writing, etc. You can’t do rigour every now and then!

**C14 Plan the Steps** – How do children progress from novice to expert? Sherrington suggests that one of the most important things that a teacher can do is to map out the incremental conceptual or practical steps in any learning process.

Do CPP leaders coach staff to establish this incremental learning where key concepts are revisited, continually building on prior learning whilst also introducing new concepts at the right time?

**C15 Specify the Knowledge** – Spell out the knowledge needed. Use learning walls, vocabulary displays, etc.
7. **Building the Knowledge Structure (MODE A TEACHING)**

A selection of key points for us to consider:

**K1 Explaining** – High quality explanations require strong subject knowledge. Teachers need time to develop their own capacity to explain key concepts simply.

**K2 Modelling and Metacognition** – Sherrington argues that teachers must model everything first. This fits perfectly with our ‘I do, we do, you do’ philosophy.

**Do CPP leaders support staff in developing this approach and facilitate discussion regarding its impact?**

**K4 Probing** – Is the teacher asking probing questions? (eg, That’s interesting, what makes you say that? / That’s true, but why do you say that? / Is there a different way to say the same thing?)

**K6 Think, Pair, Share** – Sherrington discusses strategies to engage most students. One to one questioning / ‘hands up’ should not be used.

**Feedback and Review:**

Multiple research findings confirm that this has the most impact on rates of pupil progress. It includes verbal feedback, responsive teaching, minimal but specific marking, whole class feedback (Using a visualiser to model feedback and review), closing the gap, etc.

**K11 Verbal Feedback** – The most effect way to give prompt feedback to address misconceptions.

**K17 Daily, Weekly, Monthly Review** – Regular review or retrieval practice strengthens our capacity to remember what we have learned. Sherrington reiterates that this must be low stakes assessment and owned by the teacher and student and not used for accountability or tracking purposes.

**Are CPP leaders focused on supporting staff to develop these strategies?**

8. **Exploring the Possibilities (MODE B TEACHING)**

Sherrington suggests a range of activities and strategies that teachers can use to develop the knowledge that students gain to apply a range of skills. These are often independent, collaborative and exploratory strategies. Exploring the possibilities signifies that we’re building on knowledge to see what might be possible; we’re creating conditions where learning and knowledge can be expressed in different ways.

**Sherrington suggests that 80% of teaching should be Mode A and 20% should be Mode B.**

9. **Summary:**

Sherrington argues that the highest standards are achieved when teachers cement the following into the daily routines:

a. Excellent conditions for learning are established with an investment in strong relationships.

b. Knowledge is built through strong teacher subject and pedagogical knowledge and the delivery of excellent teacher-led strategies.

c. Using this knowledge gained to explore possibilities and apply what has been learned in a range of ways.