BOOK REVIEW

The brain that changes itself

Norman Doidge, M.D. (2007). Melbourne, VIC: Scribe.

Kristin Thompson
Lecturer, Faculty of Education, Avondale College, NSW

When scientists first started to look at the convolutions of the brain, they may well have been reminded of a geographical landscape. There are few geographical frontiers still to be conquered, but the very latest equipment is only now making exploration of the brain a feasible venture.

In 2007, the Canadian psychiatrist, Norman Doidge, M.D., wrote a book that has received several favourable reviews, *The brain that changes itself*. I paid $35 for my paperback version. Although it is of equal interest to the layperson, teacher, administrator, therapist and scientist, the writing style is easily accessible to the layperson. It has been such a hit that it has become an international bestseller. It was reprinted five times in 2008, with yet another reprint in 2009. Doidge uses numerous case studies to illustrate how amazingly the brain is able to change in response to various situations or trauma in order to improve quality of life.

The book's main theme is that people can learn because brains can change. This proposal is of great significance to teachers and education administrators. This book emphasises that biology is not destiny—things can change—and that the environment can help.

Doidge shows that the brain is not static. We have been so enamoured by the machine and by computers that we have limited our understanding of the brain to the likeness of a machine that we ourselves have made. Doidge claims contact with many dedicated scientists and laypeople that have experienced the recovery of brain functions traditionally considered unrecoverable, and concludes that the brain is plastic. By providing biological explanation for some of our wilder taboos, he also makes sense of unconventional phenomena. The shoe fetish, for example, may arise because the brain maps for feet and sex are very close.

After reading this book we may feel guilty that we have not had the money, or have not been able to mobilise the effort needed to help our students and staff achieve the potential for change that our plastic brains allow. Some of the changes reported in the book have required considerable financial, physical, emotional and faith resources. Case study after case study is cited, challenging the status quo.

Norman Doidge visited Australia this year. I heard him open an address by quoting the Hebrew Scriptures, saying that the Lord God spoke and there was light. He said, "thought influenced substance". He went on to say that in the Gospel, the Word becomes flesh—"thought influences substance". He then went on to use video case studies to illustrate his point. During the book signing, I asked whether Jesus' words about telling a mountain to throw itself into the sea is an indication that Jesus sees the world as plastic, to which Norman Doidge answered, "Well, thought influences substance".

The book is very engaging and accessible. It makes change seem not only possible, but understandable. I have also been given new inspiration in reflecting on the teachings of Jesus. Enjoy the case studies and see what it does for you! TEACH