

Finding the Way Back: Brain Plasticity, Learning Disabilities, and Brain Trauma.

Author: Jim Valkenberg

Reviewed by Elizabeth Fallon

As learning center professionals, daily, we encounter students struggling to succeed in college courses. Neuro-diverse students with traumatic brain injuries, and other learning difficulties, present unique challenges that we may not have appropriate training and experience to address confidently. *Finding the Way Back* presents contemporary brain function concepts supported by neuroscience research findings. The research is applied to case studies of college students with learning disabilities and traumatic brain injuries such as ADHD, dyslexia, Bi-polar disorder and Schizophrenic Disorder attempting to overcome their unique learning challenges.

Valkenberg's thesis is that all students can learn because the brain has plasticity. He believes that students with learning disabilities and traumatic brain injury can overcome the unique challenges, particularly with the support of an informed learning professional, who has both knowledge of the science behind the learning challenges as well as a set of tools designed to address the learning challenges. In the first several chapters of the book, Valkenberg describes the research on the brain relevant to overcoming learning disabilities. He leverages the knowledge from the opening chapters via a series of case studies which show the potential impact of learning methods and tools on neuro-diverse students. Although the specific learning tools described are not new, their application in the case studies creates a freshness in the approach. The use of these learning tools by students struggling to learn is described in detail and the case study approach is an effective way to illustrate the application of the tools. This book is

timely as more students with learning challenges are entering college today. At the same time, colleges and universities are prioritizing student retention and completion. While the opening chapters on various brain functions and neuroscience research are quite technical, the application of the information via case study is useful for instructors, advisors, and academic coaches.

The author explores several key aspects of neuro-diversity, including aspects of brain function such as memory, language, learning with all the senses, metacognition, and the influence of technology. Many neuroscience researchers – past and present – are cited and quoted throughout the book. As a result, the first four chapters of the book are filled with detailed descriptions and technical information about the brain. For readers with limited knowledge of brain function and research, the information may be overwhelming or difficult to follow and comprehend. The style does not seem to be intended for a casual reader but for an intelligent reader or even a learning specialist with prior knowledge in neuroscience research topics. However, the information seems to be unbiased and the evolution of researchers' conceptualization of how the brain works is represented in this book. These topics are applied in Chapter 5: Case Studies, which is where the book comes alive for me.

Last semester, I piloted an academic coaching programming in our learning center. The Disability Services office referred many students to academic coaching. In the initial meeting with me, those students shared their experiences with similar learning disabilities and traumatic brain injury as described in Valkenberg's book. As a result, I had a vested interest in reading and learning from the information in this book. In my opinion, the greatest strength of this book is the practical application of the information,

methods, and learning tools described in the case studies. When working with students struggling to learn college course material, having tools and techniques to support those students is critically important. I appreciate understanding the rationale for why to use those methods and I recommend this book to my professional learning center colleagues, including academic coaches, tutors, and advisors.