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Including the missing subject: Placing the personal within the community

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The concept of community of practice, particularly as originally articulated by Lave and Wenger (1991), provided a useful salve at that time to narrow and injurious dominant accounts of learning as being largely a product of the manipulation of individuals cognitive structures. In many ways, this small monograph highlighted and became a rallying point for those seeking an alternative approach, at a time when the inadequacies of cognitive theories were seeing adherents looking elsewhere to understand learning and critics successfully eroding its standing. In the following decade, and at the moment, there has been increased focus on the contributions of social practices and situational factors in shaping individuals learning. Central to these has been the concept of communities of practice, far more often more popularly endorsed than critically appraised. As with any movement, some adherents press their case strongly and comprehensively, often seeking to redress the kinds of premises that were subordinated within under cognitive accounts. Yet in moves away from human cognition being seen as a process occurring largely within the individual, the particular attributes which individuals bring to the process of human cognition have become deemphasised. In essence, the subject is often missing or lacking in its representations within contemporary learning theorising that privileges the situational (e.g. communities of practice, activity systems, distributed cognition). The individual has become an unfashionable and tainted term. This seems unfortunate because the individual is rendered in some ways special, idiosyncratic, peculiar and perhaps unique, in part, through their engagement with social world, and particularly its negotiation with situated manifestations.

This chapter seeks to rehearse and synthesise a set of ideas that aim to promote the central role of the personal in considerations of human cognition. This case has at its heart elaborating the central role of the subject in mediating the social world experience and situated manifestations they negotiate with in the everyday lives. It is proposed that there is an interdependence between social and personal factors, that is relational: intertwined in some instances and disengaged in others. Instances from the work lives of contemporary workers are used to detail and illustrate these points. In all, the chapter seeks to reinstate the personal within social practice or community is being essential for both individuals learning and the remaking of the social practice or community.