

# Controversies Surrounding Utilitarian Learners and Their Learning Behaviours: Do Educators Know the Facts?

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## Abstract

**Aims:** The philosophy of *Outcome-Based Education* is grounded in a *utilitarian perspective*, equipping graduates with professional competencies. However, implementing *utilitarian education* leads to two debates: how utilitarian should the training be, and should educators tolerate utilitarian demeanours in learning? **Methodology:** We conducted a narrative review, synthesising diverse perspectives on utilitarian learners and their demeanours. “*Utilitarianism in education*” and “*utilitarian learner*” were keywords for literature searching. We then summarised findings, looked for controversies and analysed supporting strategies. **Findings and Discussions:** Educators distinguish two value-semantic forms of utilitarianism in education. *Tactical utilitarianism* focuses on learning and teaching applied sciences and emphasises the futility of foundational sciences, so it seems destructive. *Strategic utilitarianism* focuses on learning and teaching equally foundational and applied sciences and considers social and individual benefits, making it constructive. Philosophers distinguish two types of utilitarian learners. *Act-utilitarians* focus on tactical results, avoid spending time on sophisticated learning, act to get high exam grades at all prices, prioritise learning for themselves and deny working in a team. *Rule-utilitarians*, meanwhile, are likely to explore moral learning codes, adopt partial rules when building their utilitarian learning mode and accept working in a team but do not fully integrate into active learning. Some of our learners are sophisticates, while most are rule-utilitarians. The percentage of act-utilitarian is significant. The formation of learners’ personalities began at first contact with the society. Social influences consolidated the *intrinsic* psychological beliefs of the children, which determined their further *personalities*. Interactions between personality and extrinsic factors might affect learning demeanours. Educators should admit the existence of utilitarianism in education and react

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appropriately to learners' demeanours, according to their personalities. It'd be better to provide act-utilitarians with potential personalised ways to satisfy their interests while respecting general rules. Educators should assist rule-utilitarians in self-creating a learning mode which provides the most benefits rather than criticising their behaviours. **Conclusion:** In vocational training, tactical utilitarianism is destructive. Meanwhile, educators should recognise the importance of strategic utilitarian approaches, explore and identify learners' personalities and tolerate utilitarian learning demeanours. Appropriate and individualised counselling about learning modes is crucial in dealing with utilitarians and satisfying their interests.

## Keywords

Utilitarianism in Education, Utilitarian Learner, Personality

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## 1. Background

In an industrialised society, the prime mission of higher education is vocational training, which equips graduates with professional competencies. Its educational philosophy is primarily grounded in a *utilitarian perspective*, which focuses on satisfying the demands of the labour market for skilled workers (Yarkova, 2016). During the last century, educators have continuously developed various vocational training strategies. In the late 1990s, Spady introduced the outcome-based approach to professional training. Immediately, it became a basis for the most modern professional training (Spady, 1994).

The principle of outcome-based education consists of respecting a learner-centred approach and promoting active learning. Its implementation requires responsible contributions from all stakeholders, including learners (Spady, 1994). Thus, teachers anticipate learners' active attendance as well as responsible attitudes. But then again, they frequently encounter irresponsible learners coming to class disengaged and unprepared. Some educators assume learners' destructive demeanour originates from *losing a passion for learning*, whilst others emphasise its relationship with *utilitarian thoughts*. Surprisingly, regardless of their viewpoints, teachers inadequately react to learners' disengagement and unpreparedness. They do not explore the roots of this phenomenon or conduct remedial interventions to secure active learning. Instead, they execute numerous measures to assess learners' engagement and preparedness, such as peer evaluation and grading the in-class activities, which would not improve learners' responsibility.

Therefore, it would be better for us to look backwards at the root of disengagement, which includes educational perspectives (e.g. *utilitarian* or *academic*) and learning attitudes (e.g. *utilitarian* or *sophisticated*).

## 2. Methodology

We conducted a narrative review, synthesising diverse perspectives on utilitarian

learners and their demeanours. “*Utilitarianism in education*” and “*utilitarian learner*” were keywords for literature searching. It resulted in papers presenting a variety of specific viewpoints, book chapters, and diverse educational forums. We neither found a review nor a systematic review. We only selected papers or articles published in psychology and education journals or websites, focusing on and discussing utilitarian perspectives on education, utilitarian learners and their behaviours. We did not select papers or articles published in unspecific journals or websites (e.g. not focusing on education and psychology). We then summarised findings, looked for controversies and analysed supporting strategies. We also presented and discussed our experiences and viewpoints on dealing with utilitarian learners.

In this paper, we did not intend to go in-depth into the philosophical aspects of utilitarianism. However, it would be better for us to present primary concepts related to utilitarianism and use them to elucidate the discussed perspectives.

### 3. Utilitarianism

In normative ethics, *utilitarianism* regards an action as *morally right* if it tends to promote happiness or pleasure and *wrong* if it tends to produce unhappiness or pain—not just for the performer of the action but also for everyone else affected by it (Britannica, 2024). More simply, utilitarianism means the view that the morally right action is the action that produces the most good (Driver, 2022). Since the late eighteenth century, the influence of utilitarianism has been widespread and permeated the intellectual life of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including politics, economics, and education (Britannica, 2024).

Philosophers distinguish two kinds of utilitarianism: the *act-utilitarianism* and the *rule-utilitarianism* (Nathanson, 2024). *Act-utilitarians*, represented by Bentham and Sidgwick, believe that acts that result in good outcomes justify acting morality, so they consider only the results or consequences of the single act (Britannica, 2024). *Rule-utilitarians*, represented by Mill, consider the importance of moral acting codes before seeing whether they obey or disobey, so they look at the consequences of following a rule of conduct (Britannica, 2024).

#### 3.1. Utilitarianism in Education

Generally, the *utilitarian perspective on education* focuses on training learners who can fit in society and contribute as productive citizens to satisfy the demands of the labour market for skilled workers (Elster, 2015; Villar Notario & Calo-Blanco, 2009).

Yarkova distinguished two value-semantic forms of utilitarianism in education: tactical utilitarianism (narrowly understood) and strategic utilitarianism (widespread). *Tactical utilitarianism* focuses on learning and teaching applied sciences and emphasises the futility of fundamental sciences. *Strategic utilitarianism* focuses on learning and teaching equally basic and applied sciences and considers social and individual benefits (Yarkova, 2016). So, it raises a question: If we intend

to implement a utilitarian education, how utilitarian should the training be? This question leads to controversies surrounding utilitarian perspectives on education (McInerney, 2014).

The *pros* stated that utilitarian approaches can promote the learners' ability to perform assigned tasks and direct educational activities toward efficiency (Cekić, 2018). Yarkova stated that implementing strategic utilitarian education contributes to vocational training, socially and individually (Yarkova, 2016). Vocational training based on Entrustable Professional Activities (EPA) illustrates the strategic utilitarian approach (Ten Cate, 2013).

The *cons* criticised the superficiality of vocational training based on the utilitarian approaches. Tarrant cited Mill's ideas about "*trade education*" to emphasise the antipathy between high culture and utilitarianism (Tarrant, 1991). Yarkova remarked that tactical utilitarianism can be destructive (Yarkova, 2016). Deng stated that simplicity, lopsidedness, and short-sightedness characterise utilitarianism in education. He believed that the utilitarian approach is alien to the educational process and can prevent the all-round development of students (Deng, 2023).

### 3.1.1. Learners and Their Personalities

Practising utilitarian education raises two questions: Should the learners be sophisticated whilst primarily focusing on task performance, or, differently, should the learners be utilitarian while studying in a utilitarian educational environment? And should educators tolerate the learners' utilitarian learning demeanours?

Ye and Zhang introduced the concept of the *utilitarian learning mode*. By analysing learning patterns, they stated that utilitarian learners likely create learning modes that help them obtain good results in the shortest term. Once experienced with these learning modes, learners were willing to use them to satisfy their specific needs. Ye and Zhang concluded that there is a relationship between thinking modes and learning models (Ye & Zhang, 2014). Unfortunately, this finding does not answer previously mentioned questions.

To answer, educators should look back to the formation of the personality of adult learners. It likely began in their childhood, during their first contact with the socio-economic environment. Parental and social influences bred and consolidated the intrinsic psychological beliefs of the children, configuring their primary personal character, which determined their further personalities as utilitarian, egoistic or productive learners. However, while personality tends to be stable, it can change over time in response to new experiences or personal growth. So, educators should consider intrinsic personality as the primary factor shaping learning demeanours and understand that it can change in response to later changes in the extrinsic socio-educational environment. On the other hand, educators should not judge a learning demeanour as morally right or wrong. Instead, educators should assist learners in crafting the morally appropriate learning mode according to learners' personalities (Kendra, 2023).

### 3.1.2. Act-Utilitarians and Their Learning Attitudes and Behaviours

As mentioned, act-utilitarians believe that acts that result in good outcomes justify acting morally, so they consider only the results or consequences of the single act.

Act-utilitarian learners consider that acts that result in good grades uphold learning morality. They believe that acts that increase the likelihood of having good tactical results and prevent encountering bad things are morally right (Carson, 2010).

In learning, these tactical beliefs likely lead act-utilitarian learners to bring the easiest and shortest way to complete assigned tasks, avoid spending time on sophisticated learning and act to get high exam grades at all prices whether they master basic concepts supporting task performance or not. Concerning the learner-learner relationship, they likely deny working in a team, prioritise learning for themselves and compromise with teammates when performing peer evaluation (Au et al., 2024).

### 3.1.3. Rule-Utilitarians and Their Learning Attitudes and Behaviours

As mentioned, rule-utilitarians consider the importance of moral acting codes before seeing whether they obey or disobey, so they look at the consequences of following a rule of conduct.

In learning, rule-utilitarians likely examine the designed learning approach alongside exploring alternative options to achieve the learning goals before deciding how to learn. So, rule-utilitarian learners differ from productive learners in how they respect rules. Productive learners likely adhere and integrate fully and responsibly into the pre-designed learning process, while rule-utilitarian learners likely partly adopt pre-designed regulations to build their utilitarian learning mode. Concerning the learner-learner relationship, they likely accept working in a team but do not fully integrate into active learning.

Therefore, in outcome-based education, the primary issue concerning rule-utilitarian learners is how to assist them in crafting the morally appropriate learning mode according to their personalities (Yarkova, 2016).

## 3.2. Impact of Extrinsic Factors on Intrinsic Personalities

Both intrinsic personalities discussed above are somewhat morally good or perhaps ethically bad. Moreover, according to Kendra, intrinsic personalities can change in response to new experiences or personal growth (Kendra, 2023). To infer whether an act is morally good or bad, educators should ground reasoning in the educational ecosystem into which the pedagogical strategy emerges.

Extrinsic factors influence personal attitudes and behaviours (Elster, 2015; Kendra, 2023). It consists of parental choice in education, educational environment, social trends toward newly established careers, and social perspectives on the nobility of a given profession. In this paper, we limit the discussion to the influence of the most relevant extrinsic factors on learning attitudes and behaviours, including parental choice in education and teaching manners.

### 3.3. Impact of Parental Choice on Learning Behaviours

In many Asian societies, learners register for vocational training under their par-

ent's desire to respect family traditions, whether they are passionate about this choice or not. Consequently, personal interests will interact with parental interests (Koçak et al., 2021). Interactions will lead to one of the following possibilities.

If a learner is productive and passionate about the indicated career, this learner will fully integrate into active learning to become a future productive professional.

If a learner is productive and dispassionate about parental choice, this learner likely acts like a rule-utilitarian, respects the rules, and accomplishes the training to please their parents. This learner likely adopts the pre-designed regulations to build their utilitarian learning mode.

If a utilitarian learner is passionate about the chosen career, this learner likely acts like a rule-utilitarian by creating a utilitarian learning mode to reach the training goal rather than respecting the pre-designed regulations.

Finally, if a utilitarian learner is dispassionate about parental choice, this learner likely disengages from learning or reacts like an act-utilitarian.

### **3.4. Impact of Teaching Manners on Learning Behaviours**

Teaching and learning are two activities which are inseparable and impact each other. In outcome-based education, there is a reciprocal relationship between teaching demeanours and learning responsibility (Ali, 2023), leading to reciprocal interactions between the personalities of learners and teachers. Interactions will lead to one of the following possibilities.

If the teacher is passionate about teaching and the learner is productive, this learner will likely learn responsibly and dive into in-depth learning.

If the teacher is passionate about teaching and the learner is utilitarian, this learner likely acts like a rule-utilitarian and adopts principles of the pre-designed regulations to build a utilitarian learning mode to reach the training goals.

If the teacher is dispassionate about teaching and the learner is productive, this learner likely acts like a rule-utilitarian by exploring alternative options to reach personal interests.

Finally, if the teacher is dispassionate about teaching and the learner is utilitarian, this learner likely disengages from learning or reacts like an act-utilitarian to complete the course whether or not reaching the learning goals.

### **3.5. Dealing with Utilitarian Learners**

In daily practice, educators frequently encounter disengaged learners coming to class unprepared. Some educators attribute this phenomenon to the learners' utilitarian thinking. Paradoxically, they do not focus on dealing with learners' personalities. Instead, they execute measures to assess learners' preparedness, which are unlikely to improve learners' engagement.

Since the introduction of our outcome-based education curriculum, we have experienced that our students are act-utilitarian learners rather than sophisticates, and their tactical beliefs likely lead them to focus on course grades rather than spend time on sophisticated learning. We also found that measures to as-

less learners' preparedness do not improve their learning responsibility. We learnt that dismissing the existence of utilitarianism in education lets personality development down. Based on these findings, it would be better to react appropriately to irresponsibility and unpreparedness, according to learners' psychological personalities.

During the first contact with learners, exploring their learning attitudes and behaviours to identify their personalities should be the primary task. Before starting a tutorial, educators should examine learners' personalities, learning interests, and relevant socio-economic factors to predict their learning demeanours.

It is well known that unconstructive feedback or decisions are harmful. We experienced that administratively judging act-utilitarians with moral rules can result in learners' unconstructive reactions or total disengagement. So, when facing act-utilitarian learners, it would be better for us to provide appropriate counselling about personalised ways to satisfy their interests while respecting general rules rather than administratively judging their acts.

We also experienced rule-utilitarian learners who developed and practised inappropriate utilitarian learning modes. In this context, criticism might lead them to total disengagement from learning. So, when facing rule-utilitarian learners, educators should not criticise them. Instead, educators should help them think critically about different moral rules and build appropriate utilitarian learning modes, which can provide them with the most benefits.

#### 4. Conclusion

As educators, it is natural for us to welcome productive learners coming to classes presenting productive demeanours. However, we also know that the strategic utilitarian perspective on education is contributive due to its ability to develop and support learners' creativity.

So, educators should not forget the potential role of the strategic utilitarian approach in a tutorial. In this context, we should accept that utilitarian demeanours are somewhat permissive. Educators should keep in mind that dismissing the existence of utilitarianism in education lets personality development down.

There are two types of utilitarian learners: the act-utilitarians and the rule-utilitarians. Each of them reacts differently to the designed regulations. Unfortunately, we experience that our students are act-utilitarian learners, and their tactical beliefs are likely harmful. So, it would be better for us to explore the learners' personalities and appropriately deal with utilitarians according to their psychological characteristics.

Unconstructive feedback or decisions are harmful. Administratively judging utilitarians with moral rules can result in learners' unconstructive reactions or total disengagement. It would be better for educators to provide appropriate counselling about personalised ways to satisfy utilitarians' interests while respecting general rules rather than administratively judging their acts.

## Conflicts of Interest

We have no conflicts of interests to disclose.

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