AN OPEN NOTEBOOK / 01

VALUE

What counts, what pays, and what we still do not know.

A substantial, practical field guide to educational, commercial, financial, human, social, environmental, cultural, relational, intellectual and other forms of value.

THE CENTRAL DISTINCTION

What is meaningful, what helps someone, what people pay for, and what can sustain its own creation are overlapping—but different—questions.

By Sahil Tayal. Published as a companion to sahiltayal.com/value/. Free to read, print and use with attribution. This is an original framework for inquiry, not a validated scoring system or an investment, medical, or legal recommendation.

WHY THIS EXISTS / 02

A letter from the maker

I have built research-led websites and interactive experiences because I want difficult ideas to become easier to approach. I know the artifacts exist. I do not yet know how many visitors actually learn from them, remember their lessons, or change a decision because of them. A published experiment is not a demonstrated outcome.

Educational value and commercial value are particularly easy to confuse. An important idea may have few paying customers. A popular product may be commercially successful without benefiting people in the way its maker claims. A free lesson can help someone and still leave its creator unable to support the work.

The point of this guide is neither to shame markets nor romanticise unpaid labour. It is to ask better questions: Who benefits? What changes? Who bears the cost? What is the evidence? Who can afford it? What keeps the work alive?

A useful sentence

I believe this may create value for someone. Here is what I have observed. Here is what I have not yet established.

NAVIGATION / 03

The field map

This guide offers a broad taxonomy of value, then methods for deciding what to measure, how to avoid misleading stories, and how to keep valuable work sustainable. The lenses are deliberately plural: no single score captures all of them.

- Start with the distinction: creation, receipt, capture, evidence, costs.
- Move through sixteen lenses: ask what kind of value is involved.
- Try five situations: a free lesson, paid workshop, care, open tool, and shop.
- Build an evidence ladder: distinguish activity from learning and real outcomes.
- Use the worksheets: map stakeholders, counter-evidence, costs, and sustainability.
- Read the sources: OECD, UNESCO, HM Treasury, and other public frameworks.

How to use it

Circle what is relevant to a specific decision. Ignore lenses that do not matter. Do not average everything into a fake overall score.

FOUNDATIONS / 04

Five questions behind “valuable”

1. Intent

What did the maker hope would happen? This is a purpose, not evidence.

2. Creation

What was produced: a tool, insight, experience, service, or avoided harm?

3. Receipt

Who actually experienced a benefit or cost, and under which conditions?

4. Capture

What compensation, resources, reputation, learning or reciprocal support returned?

5. Endurance

Can the benefit and the work that generates it persist without hidden exploitation?

> **Caution**
>
> A benefit to one person can impose a cost on another. “Value created” is a claim that needs a perspective and a counterfactual.

FOUNDATIONS / 05

Price is a signal, not a verdict

A price is a feature of an exchange. It can reveal what someone is willing and able to pay under particular conditions. It does not fully reveal how useful something is, whether the buyer later regrets it, what someone else loses, or what people with less money would have valued.

Free is also a price, not a moral category. It may enable access; it may also conceal advertising costs, unpaid labour, data extraction, cross-subsidies, or maintenance burdens.

A financially viable product can fund fair wages and durable service. That is a genuine achievement. It still must be judged alongside customer outcomes and wider effects.

Three non-identical statements

People paid for it. / People benefited from it. / Society was better off because of it.

A price you recently mistook for the whole story

FOUNDATIONS / 06

A practical value ledger

For every project, create five columns. Do this before proposing metrics, prices or public claims.

STAKEHOLDER	BENEFIT	COST	EVIDENCE	UNKNOWN
Learner	A clearer concept	Time & effort	Explains it back	Long-term recall
Maker	Practice & feedback	Production hours	Finished artifact	Opportunity cost
Community	Reusable resource	Maintenance	Public access	Who is excluded?

Do not confuse missing data with zero impact. But do not turn missing data into a flattering success claim either. Record uncertainty explicitly.

The next useful question

What would have happened without this project?

LENS 01 / 16

Educational value

Learning that improves understanding, judgment, capability, or the ability to learn further.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

A person explains the concept in their own words, uses it later, or performs better on an appropriate task.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

Completion of a lesson, page views, compliments, or time-on-page alone.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

Choose a concept. Ask for a prior explanation, teach it simply, ask for a new example, then revisit later.

> **A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING**
>
> What can the learner now do that they could not do before?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

LENS 02 / 16

Commercial value

An offer that meets demand through repeatable, fair exchanges and supports a viable enterprise.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

Real sales net of costs, repeat purchases, referrals, credible satisfaction and sustainable margins.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

Traffic, inflated conversion claims, gross revenue without expenses, or a launch-day spike.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

Write down price, variable cost, labour, returns and customer outcome for one offer.

> **A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING**
>
> Does the exchange leave both buyer and maker better off?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

LENS 03 / 16

Financial value

Money and financial security that preserve resilience, autonomy, and options.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

Cash runway, reduced financial exposure, accessible savings, improved cash flow, responsibly managed risk.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

Treating wealth as a perfect proxy for happiness, judgment, contribution or dignity.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

List financial obligations before estimating “freedom”; include liquidity and uncertainty.

> **A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING**
>
> What decisions become easier or safer because of this resource?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

LENS 04 / 16

Use value

The benefit actually delivered by an object, practice, service, or tool in context.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

A task accomplished, a problem resolved, time saved without quality loss, fewer failures.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

Features, impressive specifications, or the creator saying it should be useful.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

Observe a real user attempt the task; document what worked, confusion, and abandonment.

> **A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING**
>
> Would someone choose to use it again if the novelty vanished?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

LENS 05 / 16

Intellectual value

Explanations, ideas, methods, questions and models that help people think more accurately.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

Clarity under criticism, replication where relevant, explanatory reach, correction of errors.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

Obscure words, confidence, novelty claims, or the number of ideas produced.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

Explain the idea in plain language, identify assumptions and invite the strongest counterexample.

> **A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING**
>
> Which claim survives your harshest fair test?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

LENS 06 / 16

Emotional value

Subjective experiences such as relief, joy, awe, comfort, confidence and calm.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

People describing the experience themselves, ideally without suggestive questioning.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

Inferring inner feelings from clicks, purchases, facial expressions or comments out of context.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

Ask two open questions: “What was this like?” and “What mattered, if anything?”

> **A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING**
>
> Whose reported experience are you centring?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

LENS 07 / 16

Relational value

Trust, reciprocity, belonging, understanding, and reliably shared effort.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

Voluntary cooperation, repair after disagreement, boundaries respected, mutually reported trust.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

Counting contacts, followers, obedience or compliance as relationship quality.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

Describe one reciprocal act, one boundary, and one unresolved tension without reading motives.

> **A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING**
>
> Is care mutual, consensual and sustainable?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

LENS 08 / 16

Social value

Benefits or harms affecting groups beyond direct buyers, makers or users.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

Access, community participation, spillovers, distribution of gains and harms, exclusion avoided.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

Calling anything “social impact” because it has an audience.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

List bystanders and nonbuyers. Who benefits and who may absorb a cost?

> **A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING**
>
> Who is missing from the ledger?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

LENS 09 / 16

Cultural value

Artistic expression, heritage, language, ritual, shared stories and meanings carried forward.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

Participation, preservation, reinterpretation, local testimony and enduring access.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

Mistaking popularity or an outsider’s praise for consent or cultural significance.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

Ask a community participant what is preserved, altered or misrepresented.

A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING

Who has authority to describe what this means?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

LENS 10 / 16

Environmental value

Reduced ecological harm, restoration, and responsible treatment of natural systems.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

Measured energy, waste, emissions, habitat, air or water outcomes with honest scope and limits.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

A green label, attractive imagery, or shifting damage elsewhere in the supply chain.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

Trace one full life cycle: sourcing, use, transport, disposal, alternatives.

> **A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING**
>
> What happens to the planet if everyone scales this activity?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

LENS 11 / 16

Time & care value

Attention, maintenance, domestic work, caregiving, recovery and time freely regained.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

Recorded hours, experienced care quality, fair workload sharing, consent and reduced fatigue.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

Treating unpaid care as costless, or “saving time” by shifting work onto someone else.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

Map whose hours were required and who chose that arrangement.

> **A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING**
>
> Whose invisible work sustains this visible result?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

LENS 12 / 16

Agency value

Real opportunities to decide, refuse, act, learn and control meaningful parts of life.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

Genuine alternatives, accessible tools, skills, reversible decisions and fewer coercive constraints.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

Confusing endless options or attention capture with freedom.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

Name three available choices before and after an intervention, including the right to exit.

> **A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING**
>
> Who has gained the power to say no?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

LENS 13 / 16

Aesthetic value

Beauty, sensory pleasure, craft, harmony, originality and form that enriches experience.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

Audience response, workmanship, coherence with intent, and attentive experience.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

Reducing beauty to a luxury price tag or universalising personal taste.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

Separate “I find it beautiful” from “everyone ought to.” Ask what form enables.

> **A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING**
>
> What does the work invite us to notice?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

LENS 14 / 16

Civic value

Capacity to understand institutions, participate fairly, deliberate, and improve shared governance.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

Access to trustworthy information, informed participation, constructive public deliberation.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

Mistaking outrage, engagement numbers, or ideological agreement for civic benefit.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

Present an issue in a way that people with legitimate differences can evaluate.

> ### A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING
>
> Does this increase informed agency without pressuring agreement?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

LENS 15 / 16

Option value

Future possibilities retained by learning, maintaining capacity, saving resources or keeping alternatives open.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

Reversibility, improved ability to pivot, durable skills, resources available under uncertainty.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

Assigning invented monetary values to hypothetical futures.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

Identify a door you have kept open and its real carrying cost.

> **A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING**
>
> Which future choice becomes possible—and what preserves it?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

LENS 16 / 16

Existence & intrinsic value

Things cared about regardless of immediate use or sale, including dignity, biodiversity, art and heritage.

WHAT MIGHT COUNT AS EVIDENCE

Thoughtful qualitative judgment, community priorities, ethical duties and appropriate evidence of preservation.

THE MISLEADING SHORTCUT

Claiming that lack of price means infinite value or that all stakeholders agree.

A SMALL FIELD TEST

Describe why something ought to be protected without requiring it to turn a profit.

> **A QUESTION WORTH KEEPING**
>
> What matters even if nobody owns or monetises it?

Observation / uncertainty / implication

TRADE-OFFS / 23

Value can be negative

Every attractive claim has a shadow side. A free platform may extract attention. A cheap product may depend on unpaid work. A time-saving tool may diminish someone else’s job quality. A beautiful building may displace an existing community.

This is not a reason to reject progress. It is a reason to ask whose costs are absent from the sales pitch. Sometimes benefits and harms cannot responsibly be reduced to one arithmetic number.

- Identify affected groups: direct users, nonusers, workers, neighbours, future people.
- Compare alternatives: including doing nothing, maintaining what already exists, or using less.
- Look for distribution: average improvement can conceal harm to a vulnerable group.
- Separate risk and uncertainty: an unknown downside is not automatically zero.

An ethical test

> If the people bearing the cost could speak, what would they say?

EVIDENCE / 24

From enthusiasm to evidence

This ladder is a practical teaching device, not a scientific scale. Do not imply that every project can reach its top rung or that controlled studies are always appropriate.

LEVEL 1 / EXISTENCE

The artifact was produced; it loads, works, or is available.

LEVEL 2 / REACH

People encountered it; impressions, visits, downloads or attendance.

LEVEL 3 / ENGAGEMENT

Some visitors used, completed or returned to it.

LEVEL 4 / OUTCOME

People demonstrate learning, changed capability, satisfaction or problem resolution.

LEVEL 5 / CAUSAL CONTRIBUTION

There is credible reason to believe the intervention—not some other factor—helped cause the outcome.

LEVEL 6 / DURABILITY

Benefits persist and do not depend on hidden unsustainable costs.

> **The creator’s discipline**
>
> Never relabel a count of server requests as a count of learners. Never substitute a production metric for evidence of human benefit.

EVIDENCE / 25

A low-cost educational evaluation

Imagine a five-minute lesson explaining switching costs. Without turning the experience into a formal laboratory study, you can learn something by observing real people.

- Ask a learner to explain the idea before seeing the lesson. Keep the question neutral.
- Give them the lesson. Observe where they pause, struggle, smile or leave; do not interpret these as proof.
- Ask for a new example that was not in the lesson. Invite them to justify the answer.
- After a delay, ask what they remember and whether the concept helped them decide anything.
- Document who volunteered, who did not, and whether your sampling limits generalisation.
- Publish what you learned, including failures and confusing moments, with appropriate privacy safeguards.

Honest result language

> “Three volunteers applied the idea in a new example” is more useful than “The world is learning from my work.”

METHOD / 26

Five traps in impact stories

Survivorship

Hearing only from enthusiastic users; the people who left may be the missing story.

Attribution

Assuming a good change happened because of your project when other causes exist.

Vanity metrics

Substituting views, requests, or follower counts for genuine outcomes.

Confirmation

Asking questions that make people praise the intervention.

Time blindness

Counting benefits now while ignoring long-term maintenance, depletion or environmental costs.

Which trap is most likely in your current project?

CASES 01 / 05

A free lesson

A clear explanation can reach someone who cannot afford a course. That is access; it is not automatic evidence of learning.

WHO BENEFITS

Potential beneficiaries: learners, educators, people who reuse the idea.

WHO PAYS

Hidden costs: writing, design, hosting, review, accessibility, ongoing corrections.

WHAT THE MARKET SEES

Revenue: potentially zero, even if someone benefits.

WHAT TO TEST

Test: ask independent readers to apply the concept to a new situation.

WHAT COULD SUSTAIN IT

Sustainability: use a light maintenance burden, a donor, a paid complementary service, or consciously subsidise the work.

Your own example

Describe where the outcome, the payment, and the beneficiary are different people.

CASES 02 / 05

A paid workshop

A paid seat is evidence of a transaction, not proof of transformation.

WHO BENEFITS

Potential beneficiaries: participants, their teams, the facilitator.

WHO PAYS

Hidden costs: preparation, travel, facilitation energy, venue, follow-up.

WHAT THE MARKET SEES

Revenue: gross ticket income minus real variable and fixed costs.

WHAT TO TEST

Test: observe whether participants can practice and later use a target skill.

WHAT COULD SUSTAIN IT

Sustainability: price fairly, make learning expectations explicit, and consider scholarships without pretending they are costless.

Your own example

Describe where the outcome, the payment, and the beneficiary are different people.

CASES 03 / 05

A caregiver

Care can be valuable even when no invoice exists.

WHO BENEFITS

Potential beneficiaries: the person supported, family, community.

WHO PAYS

Hidden costs: time, forgone earnings, health, mental load.

WHAT THE MARKET SEES

Revenue: commonly none; some care is paid labour, much is not.

WHAT TO TEST

Test: ask whether the support is welcome, effective, reciprocal when possible, and fairly shared.

WHAT COULD SUSTAIN IT

Sustainability: respect boundaries, rest, resources and the cared-for person’s agency.

Your own example

Describe where the outcome, the payment, and the beneficiary are different people.

CASES 04 / 05

An open-source tool

Access to code may unlock learning or productivity, while the maintenance burden remains real.

WHO BENEFITS

Potential beneficiaries: users, organisations, learners, future contributors.

WHO PAYS

Hidden costs: security fixes, documentation, user support and governance.

WHAT THE MARKET SEES

Revenue: donations, sponsorship, paid support, employment gains, or none.

WHAT TO TEST

Test: independent install, successful task completion and maintainability.

WHAT COULD SUSTAIN IT

Sustainability: document support boundaries and clear stewardship.

Your own example

Describe where the outcome, the payment, and the beneficiary are different people.

CASES 05 / 05

A local shop

An ordinary small business can provide convenience and livelihood.

WHO BENEFITS

Potential beneficiaries: customers, employees, suppliers, neighbours.

WHO PAYS

Hidden costs: inventory risk, rent, wastage, unpaid family effort.

WHAT THE MARKET SEES

Revenue: net profit after honest costs; cashflow matters too.

WHAT TO TEST

Test: voluntary repeat customers, complaints resolved and fair workplace conditions.

WHAT COULD SUSTAIN IT

Sustainability: predictable economics, respectful relationships, and fewer hidden cross-subsidies.

Your own example

Describe where the outcome, the payment, and the beneficiary are different people.

PRACTICE / 32

Worksheet: map your stakeholders

Choose one project and list everyone significantly affected, including those who did not choose to participate. The right answer may be “I do not know yet.”

The project / service / relationship

Direct user and possible benefit

Maker, workers and unpaid contributors

Bystanders, neighbours, future people

Who bears unrecognised cost?

PRACTICE / 33

Worksheet: the honest evidence ledger

Do not combine beliefs, observations, and causal claims in a single sentence.

What I hope this work does

What I can directly observe

What I can reasonably infer, with limits

What would disconfirm my favourite story

What remains unknown

PRACTICE / 34

Worksheet: sustainability without shame

Being paid for useful work is not a betrayal. Being unpaid is not automatic evidence of generosity. A healthier question is what arrangement preserves access, dignity and the work itself.

Real costs (cash, labour, maintenance, emotional effort)

Who has willingness and ability to pay?

What should remain free, and who subsidises it?

Which funding model harms the mission least?

What is a fair stopping rule?

PRACTICE / 35

Worksheet: design a modest test

Pick one decision you can make better with additional evidence. Start with the smallest ethical and informative experiment.

Question worth testing

Who would be a legitimate participant?

Observation that would support the idea

Observation that would challenge it

What will I avoid collecting?

What will I do with the result?

PRACTICE / 36

Worksheet: a better public claim

Replace sweeping claims with specific evidence, context and uncertainty. Practice these rewrites.

- Instead of “I changed lives,” try “Several users described a specific benefit; I have not established lasting impact.”
- Instead of “One million people visited,” try “Our infrastructure logged a million requests; the number of unique human readers is different and uncertain.”
- Instead of “Nobody would pay, so it was worthless,” try “It did not establish a paying market under these conditions; its other outcomes remain to be assessed.”

My tempting claim

My evidence-based version

DECISIONS / 37

A simple model of fair monetisation

There is no single best business model for educational work. Consider direct purchase, paid workshops, institutional licensing, memberships, optional patronage, employer sponsorship, public funding, or deliberately free publication. Each comes with incentives and risks.

A useful model asks four questions: (1) who benefits, (2) who can pay, (3) what behaviour would funding encourage, and (4) how will quality remain accountable to beneficiaries?

Monetisation can provide long-term care for an idea. It can also create pressure to optimise for spectacle, dependence, or credentials instead of learning. There is no virtue in ignoring these tensions.

A financing test

If revenue doubles, will the user’s benefit probably improve, stay independent, or deteriorate? What safeguards could change that?

DECISIONS / 38

A review before you publish

- Purpose: What human problem or curiosity does this address?
- Audience: Who is it for, and who is excluded by the format or language?
- Evidence: What have you observed and what is still only a hypothesis?
- Usability: Does it work with a keyboard, mobile screen, slow connection and reduced motion?
- Costs: What will maintenance, correction and support require?
- Ethics: Could attention, data, unpaid work or social status become hidden currencies?
- Sustainability: Is this a durable service, bounded artwork, experiment, or generous one-off?
- Truthfulness: Can the public description survive contact with a skeptical reader?

The public promise

Make something genuinely usable. Describe it accurately. Let the response inform what it becomes next.

REFERENCES / 39

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The sixteen lenses and worksheets in this guide are an original practical synthesis, not the official taxonomy of these institutions and not a validated measurement instrument. Specific examples are fictional teaching cases unless explicitly stated otherwise.

THE LAST PAGE / 40

Leave the door open

Not everything that matters can be sold. Not everything that sells is good. Not everything free is sustainable.

An honest creator can recognise all three without making a religion of any of them. Good judgment involves noticing the people, consequences, incentives and uncertainties that simple metrics leave out.

If a piece of work educates, supports, beautifies, repairs, saves time or expands freedom, that may be worth celebrating—once we have good reason to think the benefit was actually experienced. If the work also earns a fair living, that may help keep it available. Neither fact cancels the other.

Thank you for spending a little of your finite attention here. That is a form of value I should not take for granted.

> **The one question to carry home**
>
> What becomes better for whom—and what evidence would convince them?

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