CREATING VALUE THROUGH PROJECTS: AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO VALUE MANAGEMENT EDUCATION IN AN ONLINE SETTING

JOHN KELLY

Director,Centre for Project Management

UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK

ABSTRACT

A unique approach to teaching the value methodology to experienced project management practitioners, that adapts a standard framework for delivery in an online setting, has been an integral part of a globally accredited Master of Science program at the University of Limerick since 2011. Central to this is a 5 stage model delivered over a 7 week period, where learners are required to conduct a value study on a project in their own work setting. Through a series of peer reviews and collaborative online interactions and dialogue, learners develop fundamental skills and knowledge of the value process and gain practical experience applying value management tools and techniques in a live project. While value related learning outcomes can be assessed and achieved in this way, the wider positive impacts relate to the mechanisms used for engaging with and raising awareness across the project management community. We argue that online learning delivery systems such as this, may be adopted in initial educating stages for project managers interested in pursuing VMA and CVS certification.

INTRODUCTION

The Value Methodology is an established framework for delivering value through projects and programmes, yet its application amongst project management practitioners is limited. The traditional paradigm has been challenged and the need recognised amongst the project management community for viewing projects as value creation systems to deliver better performance (Winter and Szczepanek, 2008). This paper illustrates an approach adopted by the University of Limerick in providing value management education to project managers in an online setting. The results show that the online delivery mechanism facilitates experiential deep learning in a unique way. The potential for this approach to be incorporated as an entry point towards formal industry certification such as VMA and CVS, is discussed.

THE NEED FOR A NEW APPROACH

In recent years project management performance has placed a strong emphasis in delivering value and benefits and taking a more holistic view of projects to realise their potential for delivering strategic benefits to the organisation. The value methodology is an ideal framework for doing this, however there are practical challenges in developing this expertise. The fundamental courses being offered through SAVE advisors for example, are ideal stepping stones towards building this expertise, however an early intervention is needed to raise awareness of the value approach and how projects may be viewed as value creation systems.

The MSc in Project and Program Management at the University of Limerick has the value perspective as a core theme within the overall program. The value methodology has been taught at post graduate level since 1991. In 2011, a new MSc program was launched which is fully online, which presented certain challenges in following this framework. It was not possible to co-locate students and facilitate 40 hour workshops for example. This required a rethink and an alternative model for teaching the fundamentals of the value management.

Context

The MSc is aimed at experienced project professionals with primary degrees and typically 5-10 years experience working on projects. Many learners are mid-career and seek a formal project management qualification to boost their employment prospects. The programme is a 2 year part-time fully online programme, with learners located across the globe. While learners may have many years experience working on projects, they are typically unfamiliar with the value approach

The teaching philosophy adopted on this programme acknowledges that learners are central and have an important contribution to make in the learning process. Teacher are facilitators to this learning, that embraces the rich and diverse backgrounds of post experience learners, bringing

unique insights and perspectives in exploring various concepts relating to the discipline of project management. The value perspective is one of the core themes of the programme, so programme design needed to adopt this and integrate it within the overall programme.

The pedagogical challenge for programme designers was to develop a set of modules that broaden understanding of projects and how they might be used as mechanisms for delivering value. While the value methodology seemed suited to this need, an approach was needed where online learners could develop fundamental knowledge and skills and use these in a project relevant to their own setting. Pre-requisites for effective teaching in this regard are interaction and dialogue, through meaningful interactivity that encourages learners to critically engage while facilitating a sense of community and peer support within the group. Team working, collaborative tasks and social interaction enhance cognitive development and are features of more traditional forms of workshops such as the fundamentals courses that lead towards SAVE certification. We needed to create this type of environment in an online setting.

TEACHING THE VALUE METHODOLOGY ONLINE

There are a 2 key elements of the MSc programme which focus on teaching the value methodology.

Module MN6913 – Value Risk and Decision Making (6 ECTS)

This is a five week module and a pre-requisite to tackling an industry based value study later in the program. In this module there are 2 weeks dedicated entirely to the value approach. The first week is largely centred around delivering content through industry guides and standards, as well as explaining the more theoretical aspect of delivering value through projects and programmes. The second week is practice focussed, and gives learners the opportunity to practice with tools and techniques using a case study. This week is highly interactive, with incremental releases of the case study at different stages of the job plan. Learners work in virtual groups, share their work and conduct peer reviews through online discussion forums and collaborative wiki spaces. As well as assessing their contribution to these forums, individuals are write personal reflections and complete a written assignment whereby they are required to write a memo to their manager explaining how the value approach might work in their own setting. Formative feedback on their work is provided by tutors who engage and interact with learners through the forums and wiki pages. Tutors also provide individual feedback on their written assignment, preparing them for the "live" value study that follows.

Module MN6903 – In Company Project – Value Study (12ECTS)

This is a seven week module and follows directly after MN6913. This is broken down into 5 stages, which are structured and adapted from the SAVE Job Plan. The main difference here from the SAVE approach is that the core of the workshop, stages 2,3,4 & 5 below is not conducted in a single 40 hour

workshop. The approach is incremental, ,allowing time and space for reflections, interaction and dialogue, peer reviews and collaborative work in an online setting. During each stage, work is carried out off line conducted by individual learners with their own internal project team, as well as online peer reviews and interactions between learners and tutors guiding the process.
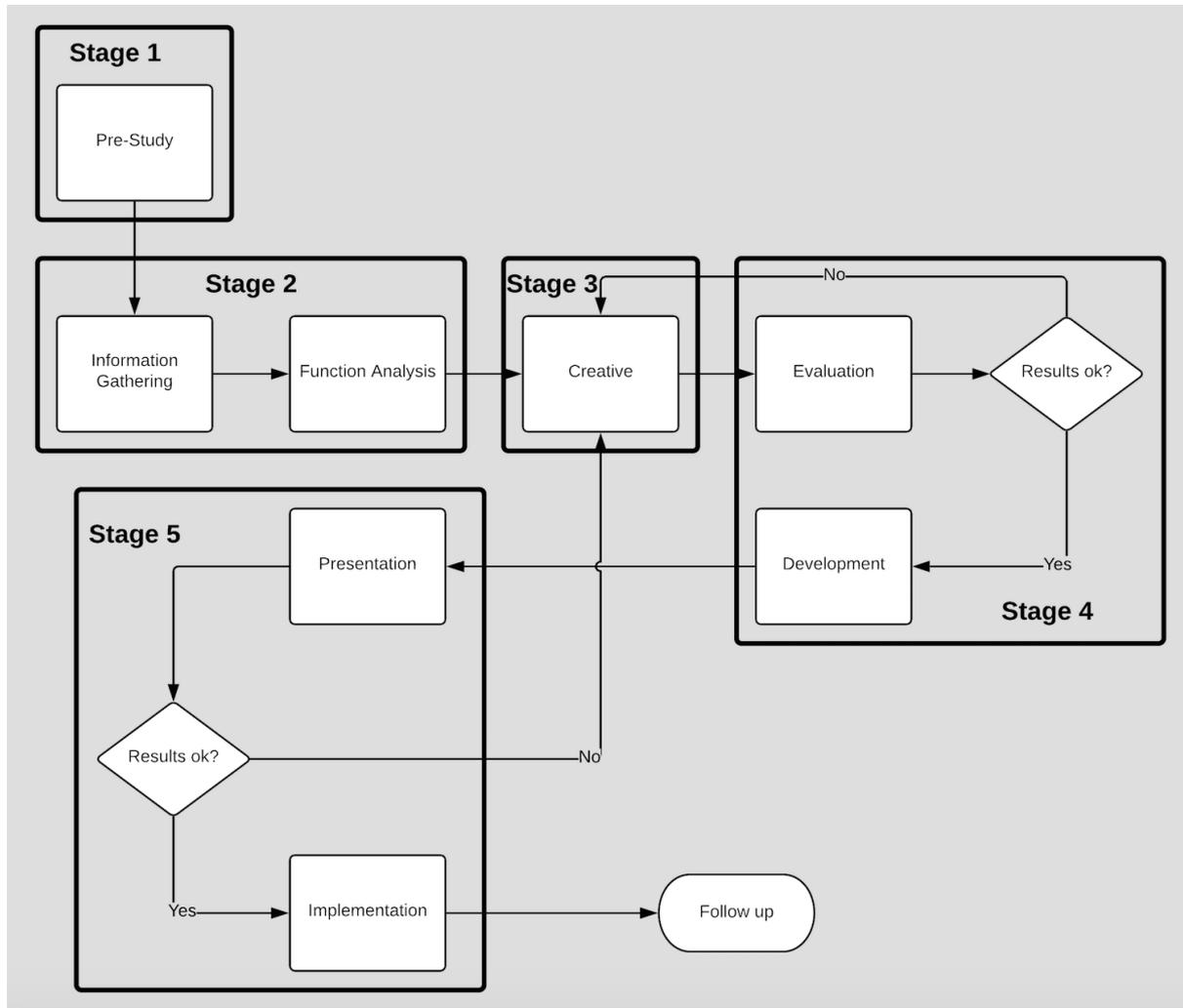

Figure 1: Value Study Framework - Adapted from SAVE International Value Standard 2015 edition

Stage 1 – Pre-study

Stage 1 is a minimum of two weeks in duration, but learners are encouraged to commence the search for a suitable project much earlier than the official launch date of the study. This stage provides learners with the opportunity to identify and propose a "live" project from within their own company in which to conduct a value study. A template is provided for them to provide project details, propose an area of focus for the value study, and identify who from within the project will be involved study. Essentially the learners become the facilitator of the process, using the expertise from within their own organisation throughout the value study. Learners are also required to identify and seek approval from their project sponsor to ensure that senior management are engaged and involved in the study. This

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is important in terms of validating their work and also in providing feedback on the overall impact of the study from a senior management perspective.

Stage 2 – Information Gathering and Function Analysis

This stage requires learners to identify and complete a stakeholder analysis, and facilitate a workshop with the project team to conduct a function analysis of some aspect of their project. The aim is to identify critical areas of the project where the study should focus on in developing proposals. While similar to standard approaches, there are typically a number of iterations needed between various stakeholders to ensure needs and expectations have been identified and are captured in the function analysis. Learners use FAST diagramming techniques, to represent key functions in the project and critical success factors.

Stage 3 - Creative.

The creative stage generates ideas for value proposals, learners need to facilitate a brainstorming session with key members of the project team and use the critical areas identified in Stage 2 as a guide.

Stage 4 – Evaluation and Development of Proposals

Learners are required to identify key proposals and bring forward for further evaluation and development. At the end of this stage learners might have 3 -5 detailed proposals evaluated with some recommendations around how these might be implemented within the project.

Stage 5 – Presentation and Final Report

This stage is two weeks in duration. In the first week learners must present their findings to their project team and sponsor, and in the second week finalise their report including an executive summary, outlining how they applied the value methodology to their project with key recommendations incorporating any feedback they receive.

Each stage has a clear deliverable. In developing these learners must work with their project team to generate output from facilitative workshops, post their findings in a forum or collaborative space where other learners and tutors can view and provide formative feedback, refine and improve the stage deliverable based on this feedback. During each stage formative feedback is provided through online peer interactions and reviews, moderated etivities and on the final deliverable. In a sense it is an iterative approach allowing periods for pause and reflection before moving on to the next stage. As opposed to a focussed 40 hour value workshop that is standard value management practice, it adopts a more incremental approach, not unlike the model proposed by Thiry (2010), that integrates value and projects through decision making cycles in program development.
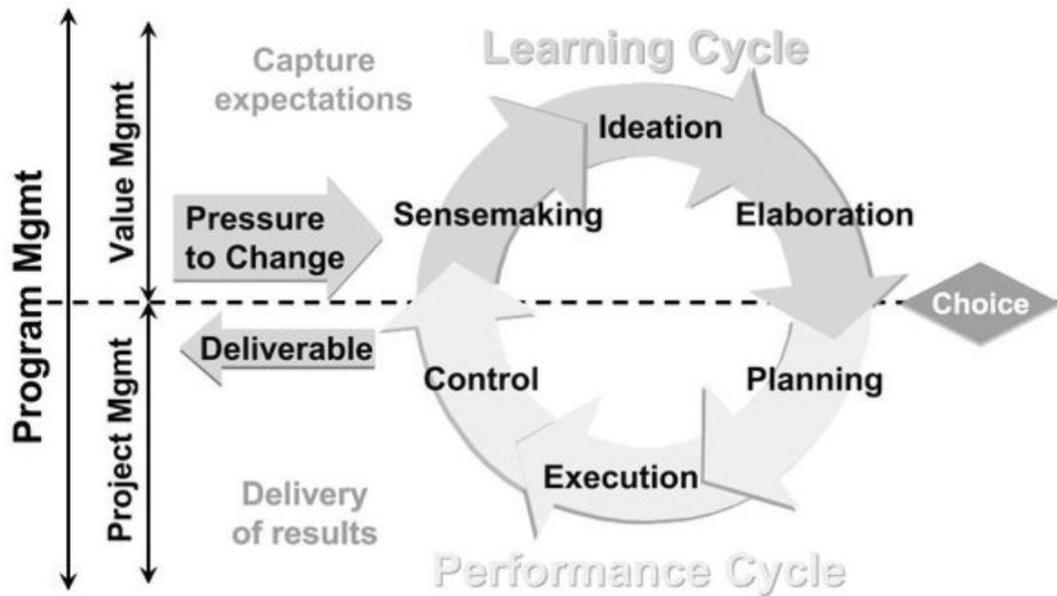
Figure 2: The Strategic Decision Making Cycle (Thiry 2010, p61*)*

Learning Activities

Learning activities feed in to the value study at key moments. Each stage has an online etivity, which is appropriate for that stage. Etivities are designed interactions involving learner contributions through completion of tasks, posting them to shared collaborative spaces, constructing knowledge and developing proposals through cycles of peer reviews and feedback. Etivity design across the MSc is based on Salmon (2013) 5 stage model. Referring to Fig 3 below, level 1 and 2 etivities are used to prepare learners and develop a powerful attitude towards online learning, during the early stages of the MSc program. This allows higher level etivities to be used in the value study, needed if learners are to grasp the concepts of the value approach and develop proposals that create value through their project.
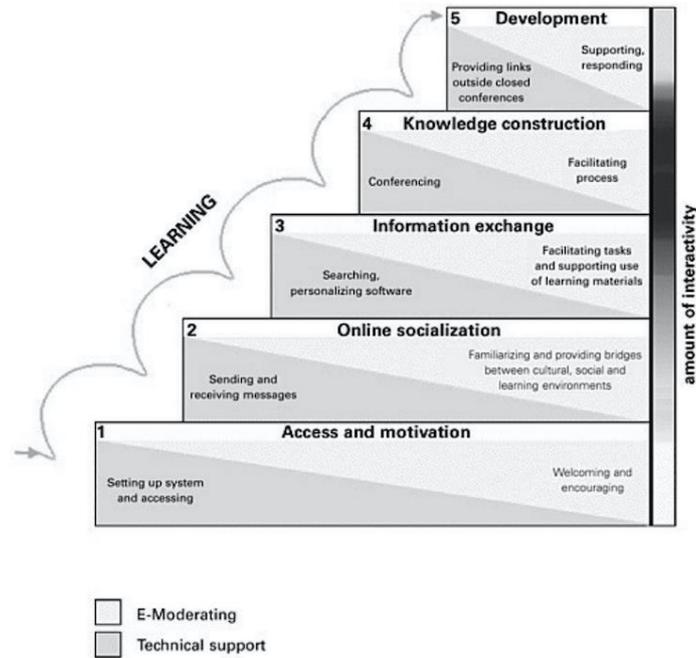
Figure 3: 5 Stage Model of Teaching and Learning Online – (Salmon, 2013)

This scaffolded approach to learning (Bruner et al., 1976), widely adopted in education, facilitates a series of peer reviews and feedback cycles. The benefits to learners through engaging in multiple acts of evaluative judgement both about the work of peers doing value studies in different contexts, and through a reflective process about their own study (Nicol et al., 2014), exposes them to a broad perspective how the value methodology may be adapted and integrated within projects to create value. The final report for assessment is developed through these iterative processes involving etivities and interim reports at each stage of the value process.
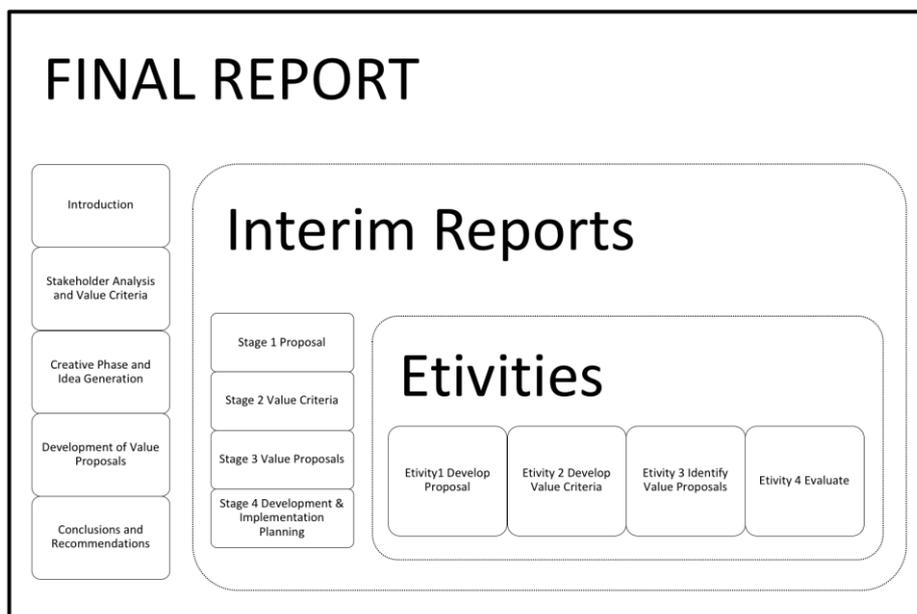

Figure 4: Learning Activities and Final Deliverables

RESULTS

Feedback on the impact of these value studies is gathered through a post-study online survey with project sponsors. While the timing of this survey does not permit a full impact analysis of value proposals generated by students, project sponsors are asked for their overall impression of the study carried out. Results show that typically sponsors express a new found interest in the value approach and acknowledge the positive impacts it has in different aspects of managing projects and programmes.

In a recent survey the importance of the value approach in developing customer relations was identified;

> *This Value Study was extremely beneficial to our organization, especially given the customer engaged in the project is a key account globally for our company.*

> *The work carried out not only created value for our customer but also validated the ongoing activity we have to form a true collaborative approach to our business engagement.*

Others identified positive results in relation to strategic business change initiatives;

> *We are creating plans to integrate this approach into our routine operations and Program Management team activities.*

> *it was applied to a new start-up business operation on this occasion, where we are entering a new sector for the first time. However we have many projects running or about to start where this exercise could be used also.*

While some commented on the value approach itself and how it has potential future benefits in being integrated into their standard approach to managing projects and programmes;

> *Excellent structured and objective approach, our challenge within the organization will be to effectively integrate this into our project management toolkit*

> *Given the exercise centred around an in-house project made it very relevant and it is obvious that the process could add value to any project we engage in. Very impressive.*

Learners write reflections throughout the study and frequently report that their understanding of value and how this might be achieved through projects was greatly enhanced through their experience completing this study;

> *Value management means a lot more to me now than ever before. I once considered value to be a slight bonus/saving to be made here and there over the duration of a project, either on some material costs or an alternative sub-contractor, that may come in a little cheaper than the last. I have realised that there is a lot more to value than that.*

Others typically comment on the learning process;

> *We learn the weekly module material, we produce the e-tivities, we review our peer's submissions, we respond with our thoughts and we form a deeper understanding on the topic overall*

I feel I have gained a great deal of experience in this module, the phased process of each value study stage was an exceptional way to form a unique and intensive understanding of every aspect of value in the project.

In Oct 2017 the University of Limerick put forward the MSc in Project and Program Management for reaffirmation of accreditation by the Global Accreditation Center, Project Management Institute. The visiting panel made specific reference to how beneficial the value study is in providing a vehicle for immediate implementation of learning in the workplace. Overall the incremental model adopted has proved effective in helping learners, project sponsors and project team members gain a deep understanding of the value process and how it can be integrated within project delivery systems across industry sectors.

CONCLUSION

The value study has proved a vital component of the MSc in Project and Programme Management at the University of Limerick. Online delivery offers unique teaching and learning opportunities suited for those new to the value methodology framework. Learners gain practice in applying tools and techniques in a real project setting, and contribute to value studies of others through peer reviews and feedback. Further investigation is needed to establish if this approach may be adapted for formal education elements of industry certifications such as CVS and VMA. The potential to reach new audiences is clearly attractive. Any initial misgivings about teaching the value approach in an online setting are unfounded and indeed with good pedagogical design has arguably proved more effective than traditional methods by allowing more time for reflection and consideration of difficult to grasp and important value concepts.

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