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From Skill-Centrism to Skill as the Vehicle of the Way: A Phenomenological Reflection on and Reconstruction of Vocational Education Evaluation

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Abstract: Following extensive efforts to dismantle the deeply entrenched paradigms of "score-centrism" and "qualification-centrism" within China's contemporary education evaluation reform, some vocational colleges have inadvertently veered toward an opposite, yet equally problematic, extreme: "skill-centrism." This emerging phenomenon refers to the reductive practice of treating single-skill proficiency as the sole and absolute evaluation criterion. Consequently, this narrow focus severely neglects crucial aspects of holistic student growth, particularly their professional ethics, critical judgment capacity, and potential for long-term sustainable development. Employing a rigorous educational phenomenological approach and utilizing a specialized auditing practice course as a primary case study, this research systematically delineates four typical lived experiences of students subjected to skill-centric evaluation frameworks. Through this qualitative analysis, the study reveals four profoundly obscured dimensions of educational meaning: the critical absence of ethical awareness, the systemic suppression of independent judgment, the fundamental rupture of sustainable career development, and the ultimate instrumentalization of the human person. To address these systemic deficiencies, this study proposes an innovative "Skill as the Vehicle of the Way" evaluation paradigm. This comprehensive framework comprises four interconnected pillars: Ethics as the Soul, Skill as the Foundation, Judgment as the Key, and Development as the End. By integrating these essential components, the proposed model offers a robust and highly potential pathway for facilitating the critical transition from merely "dismantling" outdated systems to actively "constructing" a more balanced, ethical, and sustainable future in vocational education evaluation reform.

Keywords: vocational education; educational phenomenology; evaluation reform; educational assessment; skill evaluation

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1. Introduction: The New Predicament After "Breaking the Five-Onlys"

In 2020, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the Overall Plan for Deepening Education Evaluation Reform in the New Era, mandating the elimination of the "five-onlys"—the pernicious fixation on test scores, admission rates, diplomas, publications, and titles. In vocational education, the call to break "score-centrism" and "qualification-centrism" was particularly urgent. The typological distinctiveness of vocational education dictates that it cannot replicate the academic evaluation standards of general education; rather, it must establish a new evaluation paradigm centered on technical skills [1]. Yet, driven by the inertia of this very logic, some vocational colleges have swung to the opposite extreme, sliding from "score-centrism" into "skill-centrism."

"Skill-centrism" refers to a mode of evaluation in which single-skill proficiency is treated as the sole yardstick, employing quantitative indicators such as operational speed, procedural compliance, and certification pass rates as substitutes for a holistic judgment of student development, while rendering invisible students' humanistic literacy,

professional ethics, innovative thinking, and capacity for sustainable growth. This tendency is especially pronounced in course-level evaluation: teachers organize instruction around "skill test points"; students plan their learning around "skill clearance"; and evaluation is reduced to a functional instrument of skill verification, quietly suspending the educative function of evaluation. The utilitarian tendency in education—characterized by short-sightedness, one-sidedness, and oversimplification—transforms evaluation from a tool for "promoting human development" into a tool for "screening and control." Skill-centrism is precisely a manifestation of this utilitarianism in vocational colleges [2].

Skill-centrism is not a failing of skill education itself but a symptom of evaluative utilitarianism—when "dismantling" merely replaces old benchmarks with new ones, evaluation merely shifts from one form of captivity to another. The newly revised Vocational Education Law of the People's Republic of China explicitly calls for vocational education to "promote the spirit of honoring labor, valuing skills, and fostering creative greatness," emphasizing the unity rather than the separation of "skill" and "creativity." What, then, do students actually experience within the logic of skill-centric evaluation? How are their learning experiences shaped? And what is obscured?

These questions resist answers from quantitative research [2]. Quantitative approaches excel at revealing "what is" and "how much" but struggle to access "how it is experienced" and "what it means." Educational phenomenology, by contrast, attends precisely to the lived experiences obscured by quantitative logic—it does not pursue causal explanation but rather the question of meaning: when evaluation is reduced to skill verification alone, how is the student's existence as a "whole person" possible?

This paper takes the auditing practice course as a case and employs educational phenomenology to uncover the dimensions of meaning obscured by skill-centric evaluation, on the basis of which it proposes a "Skill as the Vehicle of the Way" framework for evaluation reconstruction [3].

2. Research Method: The Perspective and Approach of Educational Phenomenology

Educational phenomenology originated in the pioneering work of a Dutch scholar and was subsequently developed into a systematic methodology centering on "researching lived experience." The aim of phenomenological research is to produce deep descriptions of lived experience, bringing to light meanings rendered invisible by their very familiarity [4]. Unlike positivist research, which seeks causal explanation, educational phenomenology pursues a deep understanding of educational lived experience—it endeavors to uncover those structures of meaning that have been taken for granted and thereby neglected in everyday life. Phenomenology offers education not merely a method but, more importantly, an attitude oriented toward the educational life-world.

This study follows the basic trajectory of educational phenomenological research: first, select typical phenomena of skill-centric evaluation from authentic teaching situations in the auditing practice course; second, describe students' pre-reflective experiences under skill-centric evaluation; third, pose reflective questions to the experiential texts, revealing obscured dimensions of meaning; fourth, synthesize themes and explore their deeper significance; fifth, propose possible directions for evaluation reconstruction on the basis of phenomenological reflection [1].

Two considerations justify the choice of educational phenomenology [5]. First, the core problem of skill-centric evaluation lies not in skill education per se but in how skill evaluation shapes students' mode of being—a question of meaning, not causation. Second, phenomenology's method of "bracketing" or suspending everyday presuppositions enables us to step outside the common-sense framework of "skill primacy" and see what has become invisible through familiarity. Educational phenomenology is defined as "educational questioning grounded in the phenomenological spirit," emphasizing that it is not a mere application of method but rather a problem-consciousness that confronts the

educational life-world directly. This position is precisely the point of departure for the present study.

3. Phenomenological Description of Students' Experiences under Skill-Centric Evaluation

The experiential vignettes presented below are derived from the author's observations and interviews with students participating in auditing practice course instruction. All student names have been anonymized using pseudonyms.

3.1. Experience 1: "Just Fill in the Working Papers Correctly"

In an accounts receivable audit simulation, I set up the following scenario: a major customer's confirmation reply showed a significant discrepancy between the confirmed amount and the book value [6]. Per auditing standards, the auditor should investigate the cause of the discrepancy. Faced with this situation, however, most students' first response was not to consider what the discrepancy might signify but to flip through the simulation manual, locate the procedure labeled "Handling Confirmation Discrepancies," and methodically fill in the working papers. When asked, "What do you think this discrepancy might mean?", Xiao Zhou hesitated and replied: "Sir, as long as the working papers are filled in correctly, that's fine, right? The discrepancy is management's issue."

Xiao Zhou's response does not reflect ignorance of the standards' requirement to investigate; rather, it reveals a particular mode of being shaped by skill-centric evaluation: auditing is "filling in working papers correctly," and the commercial meaning and potential risk of the discrepancy lie outside the scope of operations. When evaluation assesses only the formatting, accuracy, and completeness of working papers, students naturally equate "completing the working papers" with "completing the audit," leaving the ethical imperatives of "maintaining professional skepticism" and "independently pursuing anomalies" nowhere to be placed in their experiential world [7].

3.2. Experience 2: "This Won't Be on the Test, Right? I Just Need to Memorize the Steps"

Xiao Lin, one of the most proficient students in the auditing practice course, could accurately complete the entire process from designing sampling plans to compiling observation memoranda within the allotted time during an inventory observation exercise. Yet when asked, "If the audited entity has an atypical inventory management system, would you need to adjust your sampling strategy?", she froze and responded, "Sir, this won't be on the test, right? I just need to memorize the steps."

"This won't be on the test, right?"—this question itself serves as an ontological marker: the student has already equated the scope of evaluation with the boundary of the learning world; beyond evaluation lies the realm of irrelevance. Under the discipline of skill-centric evaluation, skill operation and professional judgment have been severed. For her, auditing procedures are no longer a professional practice requiring judgment but a set of operational sequences to be memorized and reproduced. When "steps" replace "judgment," skill devolves from a capacity into a procedure [8].

3.3. Experience 3: "I'll Never Be Good at Auditing"

Xiao Chen was consistently slower in operational tasks. Her working papers lacked organization, and her data verification efficiency fell below the class average. After prolonged exposure to skill-based evaluations, she began avoiding classroom interactions and even considered abandoning her major, thinking, "I'll never be good at auditing."

Xiao Chen's experience highlights a challenging reality: when evaluation legitimacy is based solely on skill performance, students who are not fast or meticulous enough are often marginalized. Despite this, Xiao Chen displayed exceptional analytical abilities during class discussions, quickly identifying anomalous logical relationships in financial data [9]. However, this strength was overlooked within the skill-focused evaluation framework, which failed to recognize her potential. Consequently, she struggled to see her own value.

3.4. Experience 4: "Forgot It All Right After the Exam"

At the conclusion of the end-of-term skill assessment, I asked several students about their overall impressions of the auditing practice course. The most frequent response was "forgot it all right after the exam." Upon further probing, students admitted that the entire semester's learning was oriented toward passing the assessment. The commercial logic behind auditing procedures, the professional judgment involved in risk assessment, and the professional responsibility entailed in audit opinions mattered little for the exam and were therefore not taken seriously during the learning process.

"Forgot it all right after the exam" is not an expression of student indolence but rather a mode of being manufactured by skill-centric evaluation: learning is not for understanding auditing or becoming an auditor, but for passing a transient evaluative node. Once the evaluation is complete, learning loses its anchor of meaning. This experience may be described as a "suspension of meaning"—the relationship between student and knowledge is no longer one of "understanding" and "possession" but of "encounter" and "passing by." The pedagogical relation is fundamentally a normative one, whereby the educator bears a responsibility for the learner's development. When evaluation focuses solely on skill attainment, this normative relation is supplanted by a technical one—the teacher is no longer a guide leading students toward growth but a technician verifying whether students have met the standard.

4. Reflective Inquiry: Obscured Dimensions in Skill-Centric Evaluation

Close examination of the aforementioned experiential accounts reveals four dimensions of meaning that are obscured by skill-centric evaluation.

4.1. The Absence of Ethical Awareness

Xiao Zhou's response, "Just fill in the working papers correctly," highlights not merely a cognitive deficiency but a systematic absence of ethical awareness. In the experiential world shaped by skill-centric evaluation, technical operations and ethical decisions are distinctly separated: completing working papers is perceived as "my responsibility," while investigating discrepancies is considered "management's business." However, the essence of the auditing profession lies in maintaining professional skepticism, investigating material discrepancies revealed during confirmations, critically assessing management explanations when evidence conflicts, and upholding independence in the face of diverging interests [3]. These are ethical decisions, not merely technical tasks. Auditing standards explicitly require certified public accountants to maintain professional skepticism throughout the audit process. Yet, when evaluations fail to address these dimensions, students are unable to develop the ethical sensitivity and professional courage necessary to ask, "How should I act as an auditor?" While auditing standards can be taught, the ability to "do the right thing under pressure" can only be cultivated through evaluative practices that emphasize ethical behavior.

4.2. The Absence of Judgment

"I just need to memorize the steps"—hidden behind this statement is an obscured question: is the essence of auditing to execute procedures or to exercise judgment? In auditing practice, professional judgment permeates the entire process: determining materiality, establishing the nature and scope of audit procedures, and framing audit conclusions all require integrated judgment grounded in professional experience. Yet, when evaluation focuses solely on "whether the steps are correct," judgment is excluded from auditing practice. Behind this exclusion lies a shift in the function of evaluation: contemporary vocational education learning assessment remains dominated by verifying whether students have met predetermined operational standards and has not yet sufficiently shifted toward stimulating students' higher-order thinking through evaluation. The crux of education evaluation reform lies in returning to the fundamental purpose of education, which is to ground evaluation in the promotion of human development as its ultimate aim [10]. In the auditing practice course, the core of promoting development consists precisely in stimulating students' professional judgment rather than merely verifying their operational proficiency. Students learn to "follow the steps" rather

than to "exercise judgment in action," and auditing education degenerates from cultivating "judges" to training "executors." Numerous audit failure cases, such as those involving major corporate scandals, trace their origins not to auditors' inability to execute procedures but to their lack of courage and capacity for independent judgment at critical junctures.

4.3. *The Rupture of Sustainable Development*

"I'll never be good at auditing" --- Xiao Chen's despair reveals more than an individual's frustration; it exposes a structural rupture: when evaluation attends only to current skill performance, the temporal dimension of the student as a "being-in-development" is effaced. Phenomenology emphasizes how people experience their life-world, and the human life-world is fundamentally temporal --- the person is always a "becoming" being. Educational evaluation ought to serve human possibility rather than merely confirm present actuality. Skill-centric evaluation measures developing students against a fixed skill standard, severing the passage of meaning from the "present" toward the "possible." Xiao Chen is not "bad at auditing"; she is merely temporarily behind in the skill dimension, while her judgment potential finds no place within the existing evaluation framework. Evaluation not only denies her present but also forecloses her future. Introducing value-added assessment, which attends to students' growth trajectories rather than judging them solely on terminal scores, constitutes a possible path toward repairing this rupture.

4.4. *The Instrumentalization of the Person*

"Forgot it all right after the exam" --- the four experiential vignettes converge on the deepest obscuration: under skill-centric evaluation, the student is reduced from a "whole person" to a "bearer of skills." The essence of modern technology, through a mode of "challenging-forth," reduces all beings --- human beings included --- to calculable and exploitable "standing-reserve." This insight maps directly onto the ontological consequences of skill-centric evaluation: "forgot it all right after the exam" demonstrates precisely that when learning serves only evaluative compliance rather than human growth, the relationship between knowledge and person is ruptured --- knowledge is no longer something "understood and integrated into professional identity" but a tool "used and discarded." Learning ceases to be the cultivation of a way of being and becomes the installation of skill equipment; evaluation retreats from educational dialogue into technical inspection [11]. When students are reduced to "audit procedure executors" and "working paper format compliers," the qualities that constitute their unique personhood --- insight, responsibility, imagination, and commitment to fairness --- are all excluded from evaluation's field of vision. The most profound problem of skill-centric evaluation lies precisely here: it has not merely omitted several evaluative dimensions but fundamentally rewritten the existential relationship between the student and education --- the person is no longer seen as "person" but inspected as "function."

5. "Skill as the Vehicle of the Way": Reconstructing the Evaluation Paradigm

Based on the foregoing phenomenological reflections, this paper proposes a "Skill as the Vehicle of the Way" evaluation paradigm, seeking to transcend the false dichotomy between "skill-centrism" and "skill-abolitionism" and to integrate skill assessment with holistic competence cultivation [12].

The phrase draws inspiration from Zhuangzi (*The Inner Chapters: The Essentials of Nurturing Life*), where Cook Ding tells Lord Wenhui: "What your servant cares about is the Way, which goes beyond skill." Skill itself is not the end; it is the vehicle that carries professional spirit, ethical commitment, and humanistic value. Within this paradigm, the evaluative focus shifts from "whether the skill meets the standard" to "how the skill carries human development." The dissemination of phenomenological pedagogy in China has advanced the development of educational research methodology, with its core contribution being the redirection of educational research "back to the things themselves."

"Skill as the Vehicle of the Way" is precisely a return to vocational education evaluation as it is: the purpose of evaluation is to fulfill the person, not to inspect a function.

Concretely, the "Skill as the Vehicle of the Way" evaluation paradigm consists of four dimensions:

5.1. Ethics as the Soul: Embedding Professional Ethics into Evaluation

In the auditing practice course, ethical evaluation must not be treated as an isolated "add-on module"; it should be integrated into every aspect of skill evaluation. According to the Chinese Code of Ethics for Certified Public Accountants, CPAs are required to adhere to six fundamental principles: integrity, objectivity and impartiality, independence, professional competence and due care, confidentiality, and professional behavior. In course evaluation, scenarios such as the following may be designed: in accounts receivable confirmation exercises, when a significant discrepancy arises between the confirmation amount and book value, assess whether the student proactively investigates the cause rather than merely completing confirmation dispatch and receipt registration; in inventory observation exercises, evaluate whether the student maintains professional skepticism upon discovering anomalies instead of simply accepting management's explanation; in opinion formation exercises, determine whether the student raises questions when evidence is insufficient to support an unqualified opinion. These are not hypothetical ethical dilemmas but real professional choices encountered in auditing practice. Ethics is not an external addition to skill but the underlying principle that permeates the entire practice of skill.

5.2. Skill as the Foundation: Consolidating Professional Competence

The problem of skill-centrism lies not in valuing skill but in the "-centrism." Skill is the bedrock of vocational education—this is beyond dispute. In the auditing practice course, the ability to execute audit procedures, prepare working papers, and analyze data are necessary conditions for students' entry into professional positions. Reconstructing evaluation is not about weakening skill but about truly "consolidating" it. How? The key is to move skill from "knowing the operation" to "understanding the principle." Take accounts receivable confirmations as an example: students should not only know how to send, receive, and register confirmation replies but should also understand why confirmations constitute a core procedure for obtaining external evidence and how different confirmation outcomes affect audit conclusions. Take inventory observation as another example: students should not only know how to design sampling plans but should also understand the basis for determining sampling ratios and the trigger conditions for alternative procedures. Only by understanding "why this is done" can skill transform from mechanical reproduction into professional practice infused with judgment. The function of evaluation in this process is to make the requirement of "understanding the principle" explicit: while assessing skill performance, question the student—"What is the audit purpose of this procedure?" "What consequences might arise if this step is omitted?" In this way, skill evaluation upgrades from confirming "can you do it" to examining "do you understand it," and skill truly becomes the foundation of professional competence.

5.3. Judgment as the Key: From "Executing Procedures" to "Exercising Judgment"

Evaluation should guide students from "following the steps" toward "exercising judgment in action." Specific strategies include embedding non-standard situations in skill assessments, such as when the audited entity's inventory counting method differs from the norm, requiring students to adjust their sampling strategy rather than mechanically applying standard procedures [13]. Another approach involves setting up "insufficient information" audit scenarios where students must exercise professional judgment when evidence is inadequate to reach a conclusion—deciding whether to perform additional procedures, expand the scope, or document the uncertainty in the working papers. Additionally, students' "professional skepticism" can be evaluated in group exercises by assessing their sensitivity to anomalous signals, persistence in

questioning contradictory evidence, and careful verification of ostensibly plausible explanations. Judgment is the core competence of the auditing profession and should be the central dimension of auditing evaluation. As auditing standards emphasize, professional judgment permeates the entire audit process; evaluation that neglects judgment strips auditing education of its essence.

5.4. Development as the End: Seeing the Student as "Becoming"

Evaluation should regard students with a developmental perspective, focusing on their potential for growth rather than solely assessing their current performance. At the operational level, value-added assessment can be implemented to monitor students' progress in areas such as judgment, ethical awareness, and professional skepticism, rather than relying exclusively on final scores. Professional growth portfolios can also be developed to document critical transitions—such as moving from "following the steps" to "exercising judgment in action" and from "avoiding ethics" to "confronting ethics"—making visible the trajectories of growth that skill indicators often fail to capture. Every student is an auditor "in becoming"; the purpose of evaluation is to illuminate the path toward their potential.

5.5. Implementation Pathways

Taking the auditing practice course as an example, the operationalization of the "Skill as the Vehicle of the Way" evaluation paradigm involves three levels [9].

At the curriculum level, the core task is reconstructing the evaluation indicator system. In addition to existing skill assessments, ethical scenario judgment tests, case analysis and professional defense sessions, and value-added assessment with learning narrative portfolios should be established. The four-dimensional evaluation is not a simple aggregation; a single practicum can simultaneously assess multiple dimensions: the accounts receivable confirmation exercise evaluates both operational compliance (skill) and awareness of discrepancy investigation (ethics) as well as the reasonableness of adjusted strategies (judgment).

At the teaching level, the core task is promoting "educating the whole person through skill instruction." Teachers must naturally embed ethical discussion and judgment training within skill instruction—for instance, in confirmation exercises, asking "what does this discrepancy mean?"; in inventory observation exercises, asking "why this particular sampling strategy?" Such questioning merges skill training with the cultivation of judgment, transforming evaluation from "endpoint inspection" into "processual accompaniment."

At the institutional level, the core task is forming evaluative synergy. Colleges need to adjust their orientation toward teaching evaluation, encouraging faculty to invest in ethical cultivation and judgment training beyond skill instruction [13]. Professional skill competitions and certification standards should also incorporate dimensions of professional judgment and ethical competence, aligning external evaluation with course-level evaluation. At the same time, as education authorities advance the "1+X" certificate system and related reforms, they should avoid reducing the "X" to a mere accumulation of additional skill certificates and instead understand it as comprehensive certification encompassing skill, ethics, and judgment.

6. Conclusion

The shift from "skill-centrism" to "skill as the vehicle of the way" is not a rejection of skill education but a redefinition of what vocational education evaluation entails. The ultimate question evaluation must address is not "what can the student do?" but "who is the student becoming?" When evaluation moves beyond focusing solely on skills, the student's holistic development can emerge within the educational framework. As education evaluation reform transitions into a constructive phase, the central question persists: in fostering a robust society through education, what role should evaluation assume? The answer may lie in the fundamental educational principle—to make every "becoming" student fully visible.

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