

Talking It Through

Podcasts as Low-Stakes, High-Impact Assessments for
Career Development in Biostatistics

Kara McCormack

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Introduction: Course Context

- BIOS 691: Field Observations in Biostatistics, 1 credit
- Fall semester, 50-80 students (50% international, non-native English speakers)
- Once per week guest speakers working in (bio)statistics (& related) roles in non-profit, industry, and government.
 - Sharing about career journey, current roles & projects, advice for new (bio)statisticians
- Only assessments are 1) attendance and 2) online post-presentation surveys

Previous Assessment Example

“What did you find interesting about today’s presentation?”

“Research focus”

“RShiny dashboard”

“Typical workflow”

— *Actual student responses to a post-presentation survey*

Concerns



Surface-level reflection

Traditional surveys and written reflections rarely capture how students are actually processing their professional futures (e.g. one-word responses instead of genuine thinking)

- Creating space for **authentic reflection** is extremely important - especially for career development & in the age of AI!
 - AI can cut students off from their own **critical thinking**, **creativity**, and **connection** with classmates.

Guiding Question

- How can I create a container for **authentic student reflection** in my career-development class, simultaneously creating space for community-building and creativity?

  Sparking joy

Humanizing the classroom means creating space for genuine voice, peer connection, and authentic identity development. Not just content delivery!

Approach: Collaborative Podcasts

- Aim of fostering authentic, conversational reflections on career journeys and presentations
 - Students self-selected into groups of 3-4, recorded 6-7 minute podcasts, encouraged to be **conversational** in tone
 - Recorded using **simple tools** (e.g. phone, Zoom audio, free editing software), submitted via the course LMS
 - 5 podcasts throughout the semester
- Final podcast was a “Discussion Post” where each student was assigned 2 podcasts to listen & respond to in the forum

Assessment

Each part of rubric either “Great” (2 pts) or “Needs Improvement” (0-1 pt):

- **Connection & Reflection:** Evidence of specific engagement with presentation content
- **Participation:** Each group member speaks for ≥ 30 seconds, offering a unique perspective
- **Creativity/Engagement:** Engaging, conversational, fun/funny

Authentic reflection

“It actually forced me to think critically about the visits/visitors. If it was a discussion post there is a very **high chance I would have written in-authentic reflections.**”

“Recording podcasts for this class made me think deeper on what I wanted. I feel like classes **rarely give students that opportunity or space to do that.** It was incredibly helpful to tie what I learned from presenters and companies and think harder about how that could play into what I wanted for my future.”

Community building 🤝 & Creativity 🎨

“I really enjoyed having that conversational aspect with my classmates...Overall, recording the podcasts was a **great way to not only connect with my peers, but learn more about what I want personally and professionally.**”

“It was really nice to hear what my friends and peers think about their future professional decisions...the podcast projects definitely **brought us closer.**”

- **Creativity:** Fun group names (“Biostats Bros”, “Biostats Chat”) and intro music!

Challenges

Student Perspective

- Making podcasts sound conversational, not scripted
- Coordinating busy schedules
- Avoiding repetition when companies shared similar content

Instructor Perspective

- Unsure how to handle students creating (what I assumed were) AI-generated podcast scripts & reading them
 - I did not explicitly make a policy about AI use for this assignment

What I'll do differently next time

- Rotating groups
- Varying prompts
- Posting all podcasts as “discussion” posts for other students to listen to, to increase the opportunity to learn from & connect with classmates

Reflections ✨

- Discovery of self and career path
 - Recognize previously unconsidered career paths
- A pedagogy that cannot be replaced by AI
 - Joy in authentic human connection & collaborative meaningmaking

Future directions

- Podcast reflections can be easily translated into (bio)statistics classrooms
- Opportunity for students to reflect on their own learning process (**meta-cognition**)
- Planning to incorporate this into my undergraduate regression course and graduate linear models course: reflecting on learning R coding or challenges of collaboration on a project

Thank you!

kmcco@unc.edu