

# How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb[s]

Emilio Tuosto @ GSSI

ETAPS Mentoring Workshop @ Turin

April 11, 2026

# Today's menu

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We'll talk about

- ▶ mentee-mentor relations
- ▶ considering different levels

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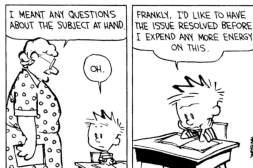
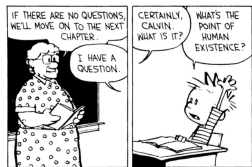
Something about me (just to give you some context)

I'll keep it short indeed

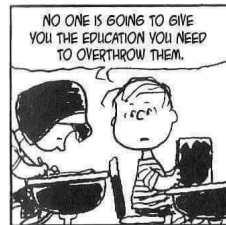
## Communication



## Goals & Priorities



## Expectations



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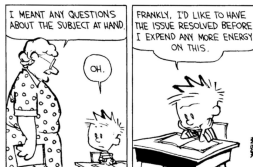
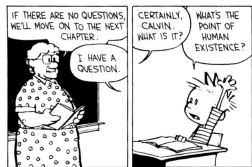
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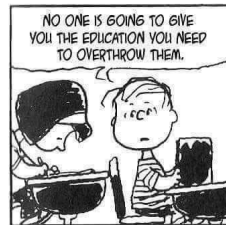
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Concluding remarks

– Prelude –

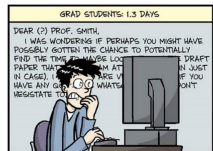
## Take-away message

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Complex relationship involving

- ▶ knowledge exchange (essentially)
- ▶ personal relations too

AVERAGE TIME SPENT COMPOSING ONE E-MAIL



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Setting high goals is fine

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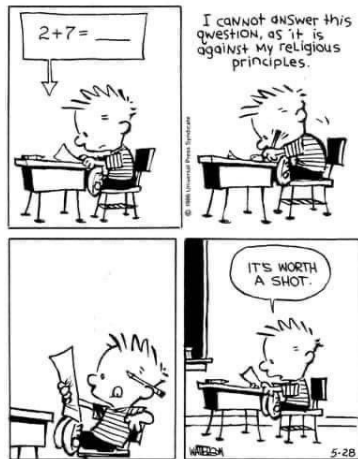
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Setting high goals is fine

- ▶ ...but set a plan B too

Establishing a productive collaboration is hard

- ▶ goals' alignment & expectation management
- ▶ actual research area
- ▶ age, culture, attitude
- ▶ ...



As student<sup>1</sup>

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# About eM

As student<sup>1</sup>

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  - ▶ got interested in formal maths & logic
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so I now I don't care ABOVE rankings 😊

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  - ▶ Change of goals
  - ▶ MSc & PhD degrees
- ▶ I started to build my network
  - ▶ Some teaching & undergrad supervision
  - ▶ Involved in many research collaborations

so I now I don't care above rankings 😊

credits to my professors

credits to my supervisors

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As young researcher

## As young researcher

- ▶ 2 years postdoc (still in Pisa)
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  - ▶ My first PhD (co-)supervision

learning about other approaches  
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  - ▶ Extending my network
  - ▶ My first PhD (co-)supervision
  
- ▶ Started as lecturer in UK
  - ▶ Intense interaction with students
  - ▶ Expanding my network

learning about other approaches  
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BSc, MSc, PhD, & interns

As mentor

As mentor

- ▶ Mentoring-related service
  - ▶ MSc welfare tutor, final project coordinator, and progression tutor
  - ▶ PhD coordinator and chair of the academic board

UK

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### ▶ Supervision

- ▶ about 100 students' final projects
- ▶ PhD supervision
  - ▶ advisor of 5 students
  - ▶ co-advisor of 8 students

both BSc and MSc

from 9 different countries; only 1 from IT 😊

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### ▶ Research-wise

- ▶ Many collaborators
- ▶ 4 Postdocs

involving also MSc & PhD students' in several countries

UK / IT, at different stages of their career

## With hindsight

Pisa was a great place

- ▶ I was granted a lot of independence
- ▶ but I remained there for too long

I did apply for PhD at other institutions

Adapting to the UK system was not easy

- ▶ I got a good advise!
- ▶ I got great mentors

teaching is quite "structured"  
very international context

Changing back to Italy was smoother, but not smooth 😊

– The undergraduate level –

## On eM's MSc thesis

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### Context

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  - ▶ no choice on the nature of the thesis
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- ▶ why I didn't? 'cause
  - ▶ I like self-learning and I thought
    - ▶ “supervisors are not there to teach me” also,
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A year later I learned that understanding that concept was indeed a challenging endeavour!

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A (clever) MSc students was not progressing

- ▶ problem: poor spoken English; it was not easy to realise what, but the solution was easy

## Mentors & undergrads: some considerations

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- ▶ Mentors should
  - ▶ consider that the interaction is short-term
  - ▶ students' goals & need
  - ▶ students' skills

e.g., I had to learn how to propose appealing projects

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- ▶ Students should

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- ▶ Supervision could be tricky

- ▶ communication/cultural barriers may not be easy to spot
- ▶ sometimes external support is required
- ▶ in case of problems, it is not hard to replace mentors

*e.g., counselling*

– The graduate level –

# Terms and conditions

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- ▶ What is a PhD about?
  - ▶ An in-depth exploration of an interesting topic
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  - ▶ Find (a possibly nice and) original solution
  - ▶ Disseminate the results
  - ▶ Write a thesis

not necessarily sequentially!

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  - ▶ Write a thesis
- ▶ How does it work?
  - ▶ “I do experiments, advisor writes paper”
  - ▶ “I’ll get away with a literature review”
  - ▶ “The thesis is just a collection of papers”
  - ▶ “I decide when to submit”<sup>2</sup>

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Some beliefs may not apply  
true in some areas/countries  
no, you won't

true in some countries  
rules differ depending on the country

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Let's start from me

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My PhD advisor was just great

- ▶ he is very friendly and easy-going...and very patient
- ▶ our plans were aligned
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Luckily I realised pretty soon that

- ▶ my strategy was not good
- ▶ it's okay not to know something
- ▶ mentors were more than happy to help

I know...that's obvious, but...

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Supervisors may become unsupportive when students

- ▶ are not engaged
  - ▶ a student of mine didn't prepare for an important meeting **no valid reason!**
  - ▶ a student violated **academic integrity**

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  - ▶ Glitches/misunderstanding are quite likely
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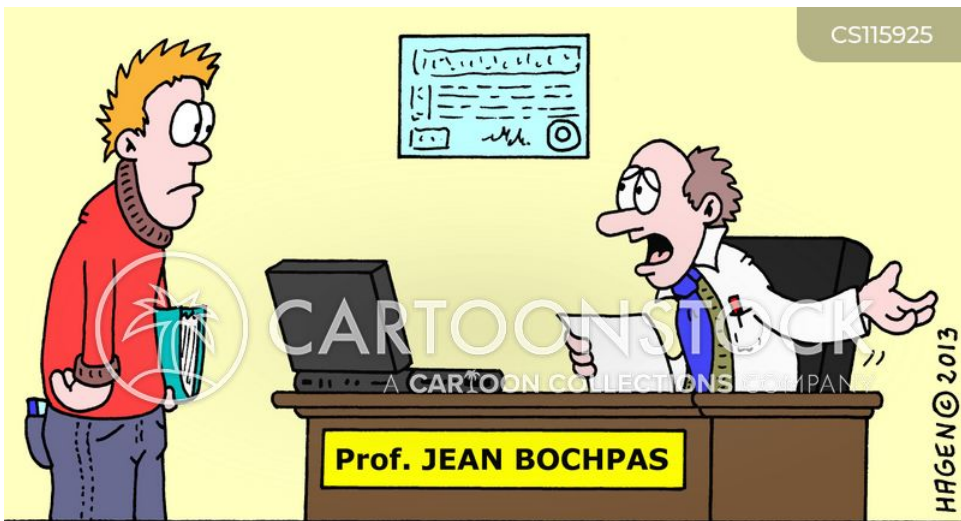
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- ▶ Ambitions & expectations management
  - ▶ Aim high, but have a recovery plan
  - ▶ Prepare for failures
- ▶ External mitigation may be necessary
  - ▶ Nowadays, there are structured ways to do that
  - ▶ Seek for colleagues or other staff's advice

*Changes are possible, but at early stages only  
this is controversial, I know*

*interactions can thin out towards the end*

– The young-researcher level –

## Is there life after a PhD?



**So you have a PhD, big deal,  
everyone working here has one!  
The question is, what can you really do?**

## Different games

Postdocs are on the path for academia

What's appropriate depends on different factors:

# Different games

Postdocs are on the path for academia

What's appropriate depends on different factors:

- ▶ Early career researchers

- ▶ must adapt

- ▶ a change of environment is likely

- ▶ a change of topic is possible

- ▶ must develop their own path

- ▶ (perhaps) within a specific project

- ▶ must create/expand their network

- ▶ take opportunities at project meetings or conferences

- ▶ prepare for the next step

- ▶ aim for tenure / permanent positions

and should be welcome

unless your PhD was on a popular topic

different mentors have different styles

constraints the research

permanent is becoming a mythological creature

# Mentoring postdocs

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  - ▶ introduce them in my network
  - ▶ help with career advise
  
- ▶ Some postdocs may have special needs
  - ▶ researchers returning after a career break
  - ▶ someone who left academia and wants to return
    - ▶ some start doing research after their retirement
    - ▶ some take unpaid leave to do research

*e.g., in UK there are funding bodies for that*

– Concluding remarks –

# When is the relation productive?

Mentee    Mentor

Engage & get involved  
Co-operate  
Proactive  
Manage frustration  
Appreciate complexity of research context

Foster interests  
Chase & encourage  
Train for independent work  
Manage expectation (yours & theirs)  
Appreciate stressful conditions



# Best wishes to you

“It’s not just about publications and grants!”



I hope your working context will be as nice as mine was

Thank you!