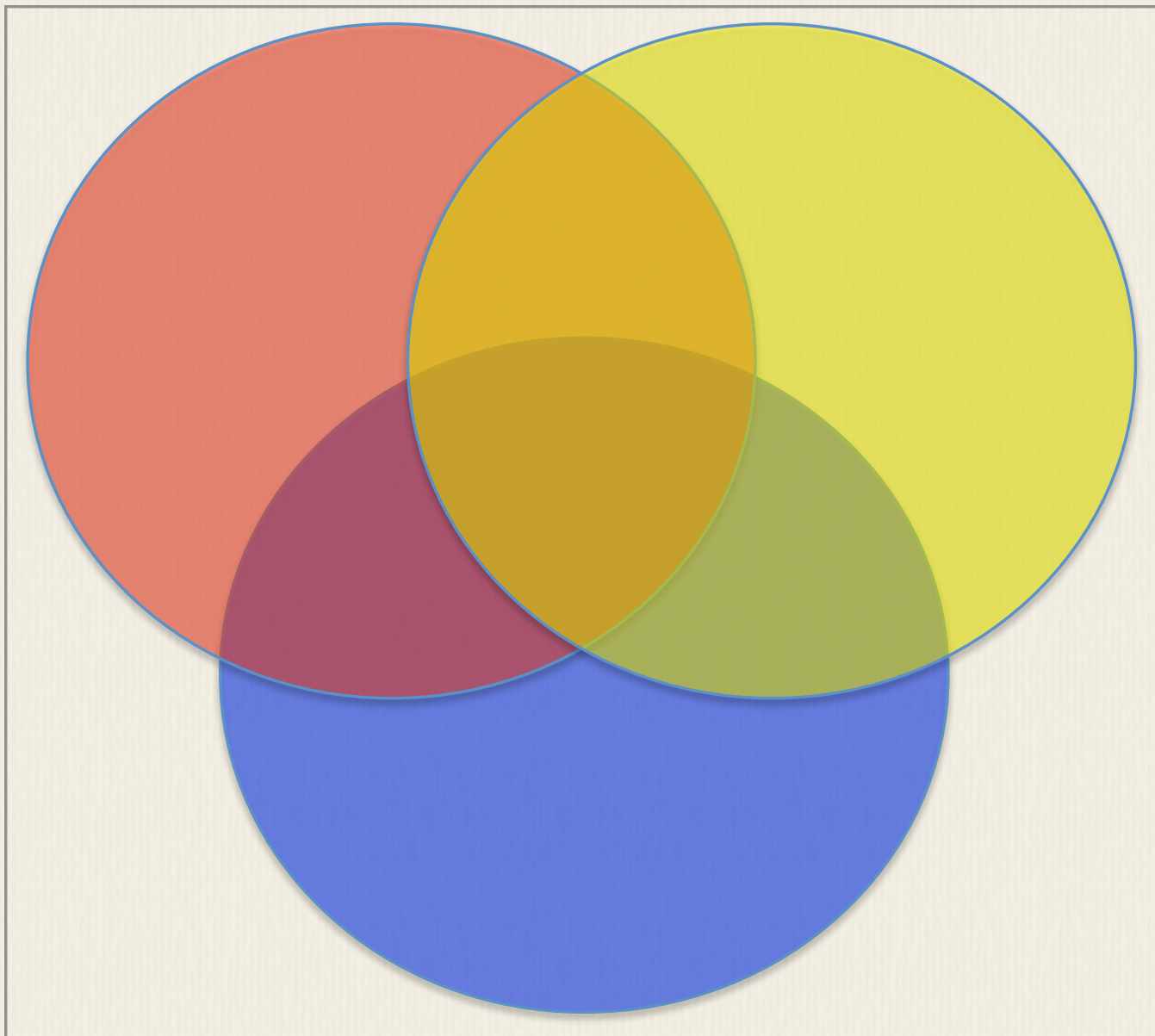




Decision-Forcing Cases



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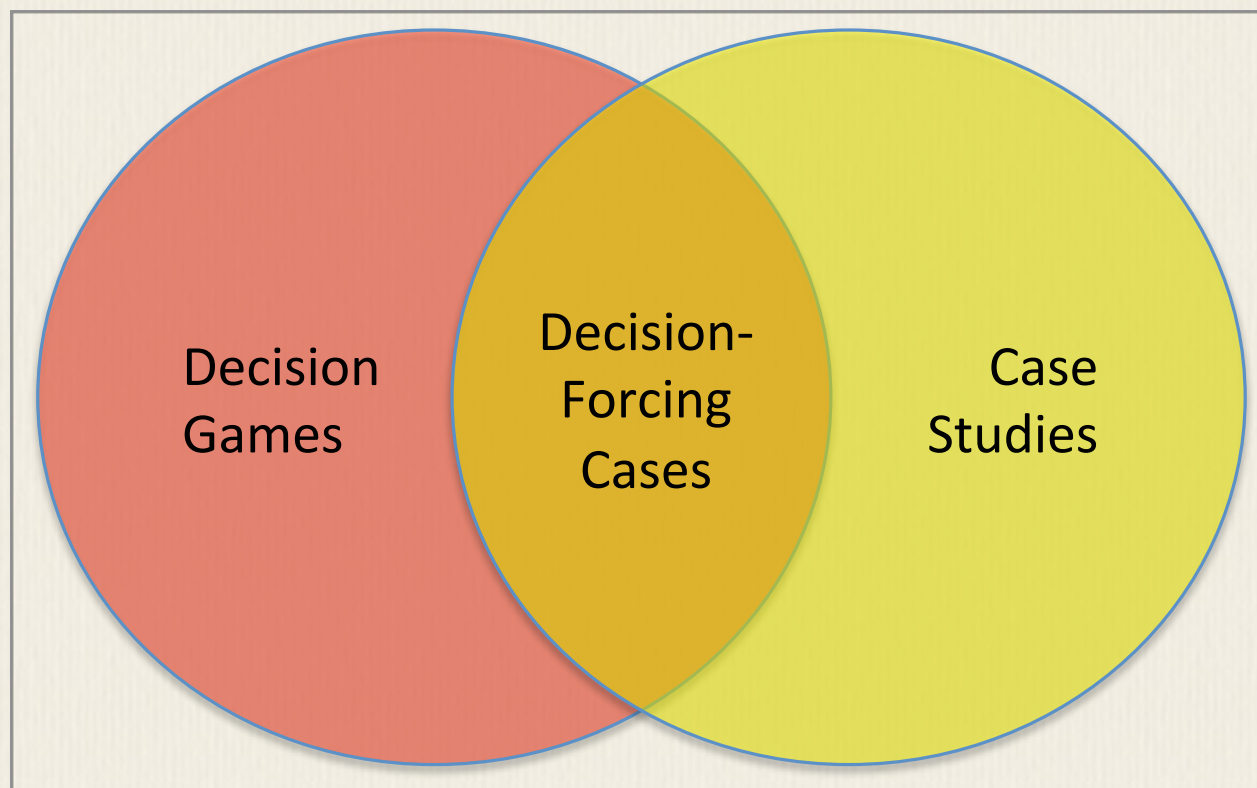
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What is a Decision-Forcing Case?

A decision-forcing case is an exercise which asks students to solve a problem faced by an actual person at some point in the past. Because the problem is drawn from real life, a decision-forcing case is a type of case study. Because students are asked to provide specific solutions to a concrete problem, a decision-forcing case is also a kind of decision game. In other words, a decision-forcing case is both a case study that asks students to make a decision and a decision-game based on real facts.

A case study that describes an event without asking students to make a decision is not a decision-forcing case. Rather, it is a ‘retrospective case study’. Likewise, a decision game based upon an imaginary scenario is not a decision-forcing case, but a ‘fictional decision game’.



Decision Games

A decision game is an exercise in which students are presented with a scenario, invited to take on the role of a character in that scenario, and then asked to make decisions in that role. If the scenario is based upon an event that actually took place, then the exercise is a decision-forcing case. If, however, the scenario departs from history *in any way*, then the exercise becomes a fictional decision game. (Just as the changing of a single fact turns a work of history into an historical novel, the same act turns a decision-forcing case into a fictional decision game.)

Whether fictional or based upon real events, a decision game can be used to teach a wide variety of subjects. Thus, in the world of professional military education, there are tactical decision games (TDGs), operational decision games (ODGs), and strategic decision games (SDGs), as well as ethical decision games (EDGs) and leadership decision games (LDGs).

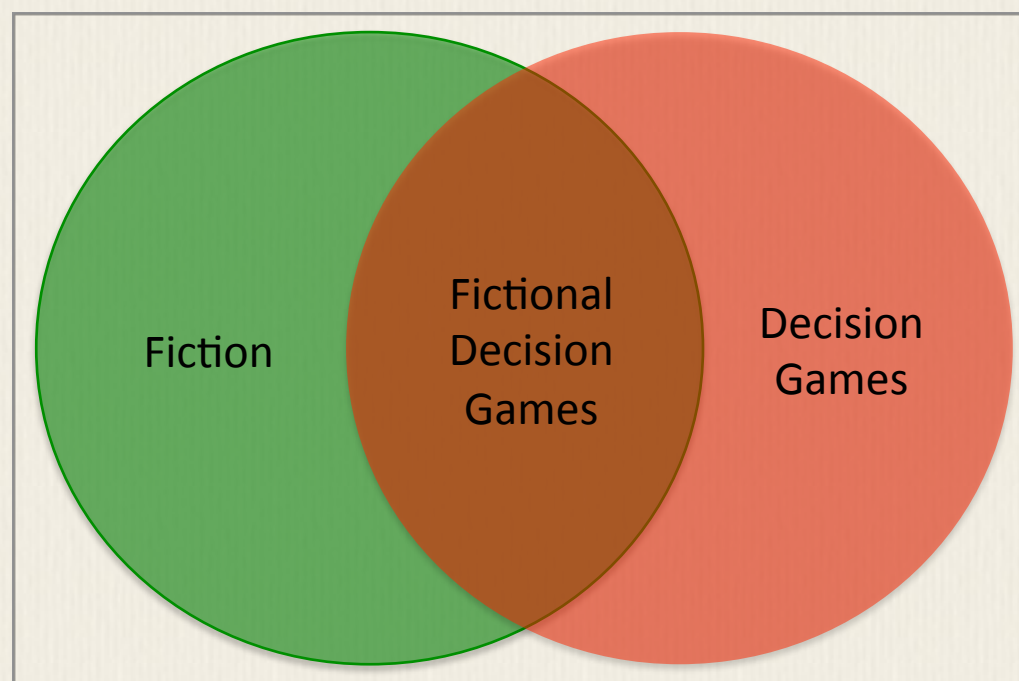
Some people believe that the term ‘decision game’ fails to convey the fact that such exercises are tools for serious study. They therefore replace the word ‘game’ with ‘exercise’, turning ‘tactical decision games’ into ‘tactical decision exercises’ (TDEs), ‘ethical decision games’ into ‘ethical decision exercises’ (EDEs), and so forth.



Fictional Decision Games

A fictional decision game is a decision game in which any of the components of the story is a work of imagination. Therefore, if any of the characters, organizations, or places in a decision game are made up, then that exercise is a fictional decision game. Likewise, if any of the events that provide context to the problem (or problems) at the heart of a decision game did not take place as described, then the exercise is a fictional decision game.

Very few fictional games are complete works of imagination. Indeed, in many instances, the chief purpose of the fictional elements in fictional decision games is the highlighting of the elements drawn from real life. For example, military leaders have long used fictional decision games based on actual terrain as a means of studying the military implications of various types of terrain. Such study, in turn, served both as a means of educating subordinates and a form of contingency planning. (When they took place indoors, such fictional decision games were known as map problems, map games, or tactical problems. When they took place on the actual ground being studied, they were known as tactical rides.)



The great virtue of fictional decision games is that they allow the teacher to design an exercise around a particular phenomenon, thereby drawing student attention to it. For most of the long history of fictional decision games, this phenomenon has been terrain. Indeed, in the German military tradition, the connection between fictional decision games and terrain is so strong that fictional decision games are called ‘map problems’ (*Planspiele*). More recently, writers of fictional decision games have been using them to explore things other than the use of ground. For example, the revival of the fictional decision game that took place in the US Marine Corps during the late 1980s and early 1990s saw fictional decision games used to explore various techniques, conventions, and procedures related to maneuver warfare. (For links to sites that provide tactical decision games, please see these pages on the websites [The Case Method in PME \(Introduction\)](#) and [Unit Professional Military Education](#).)

**Niccolò Machiavelli on
Fictional Decision Games**

“Philopoemon, Prince of the Achaeans, among other praises which writers have bestowed on him, is commended because in time of peace he never had anything in his mind but the rules of war; and when he was in the country with friends, he often stopped and reasoned with them: “If the enemy should be upon that hill, and we should find ourselves here with our army, with whom would be the advantage? How should one best advance to meet him, keeping the ranks? If we should wish to retreat, how ought we to set about it? If they should retreat, how ought we to pursue?” And he would set forth to them, as he went, all the chances that could befall an army; he would listen to their opinion and state his, confirming it with reasons, so that by these continual discussions there could never arise, in time of war, any unexpected circumstances that he could deal with.”

Source: Niccolò Machiavelli (W.K. Marriott, translator), *The Prince*, Chapter 14

The great advantage of the fictional decision game is that it allows the instructor to tailor the exercise to the particular lesson he is trying to teach. Thus, if he wishes to teach the conduct of a single envelopment by squad made up of three fire teams, he can design a scenario that is well suited to that technique. That is, the enemy will be of suitable size, the general situation will permit such a maneuver, and the terrain will offer both a covered avenue of approach for the maneuver element and a suitable position for the base of fire.

Alas, the freedom to build an exercise around a given lesson is also the freedom to build that exercise around a given prejudice. Such was the fatal flaw of the educational system of the German Army of the period between the Wars of Unification (1864-1871) and the end of the Second World War (1939-1945). By making extensive use of tactical decision games that called for decisive action in the face of imperfect information, the German military educational system fostered a degree of tactical virtuosity that has yet to be matched in human history. At the same time, the German military educational system neglected problems that lay outside of the narrow realm described by these fictional scenarios. Thus, German soldiers had no particular advantage in such fields as logistics, grand strategy, international politics, civil-military relations, and guerrilla warfare. Indeed, because they had developed such great expertise in tactics, German soldiers often sought tactical solutions to problems that should have been solved by other means.

Case Studies

A case study is an examination of a particular event. If this examination is made with the benefit of hindsight, then the case study is a retrospective case study. If, however, the event is only described to the point at which a decision is called for, then the case study is a decision-forcing case.

A student reading a retrospective case study is not directly involved in the events in question. That is, he is an impartial observer who benefits from knowledge that was not available to people involved in the actual event. (This is why retrospective cases are also known as ‘descriptive cases’ and ‘evaluative cases’.) A student working through a decision-forcing case, however, places himself inside the story, taking on the role of the actual person who was faced with a particular problem at a particular point in space and time. Like that protagonist, the student involved in a decision-forcing case does not know the outcome of the events in question and, in particular, whether or not the solution he chooses will work.

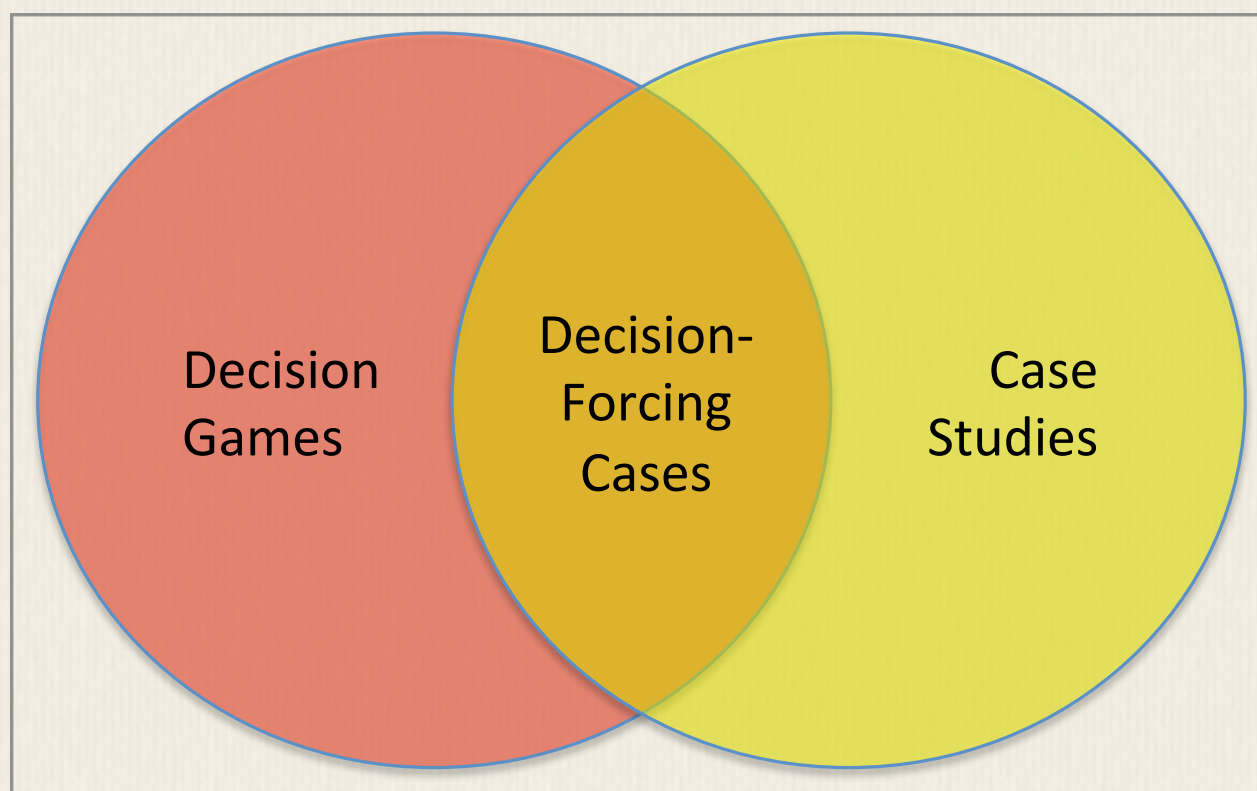
Because decision-forcing cases put students in the role of a decision-maker who is looking forward towards an unavoidably uncertain future, they are sometimes called ‘prospective cases’.





Benefits of Decision Forcing Cases

Decision-forcing cases offer a variety of benefits to students. Some of these benefits are a function of the links between decision-forcing cases and an actual events. Others derive from the requirement that students examine the case from the point of view of a particular individual. Some of the benefits of learning from decision-forcing cases result from the requirement that students make, explain, and defend decisions. Others are a product of the need to make sense of many different kinds of evidence. A few of the benefits of the use of decision-forcing cases - and these tend to be the most important benefits - come from the interaction of these different aspects. One of these is the fact that decision-forcing cases are inherently engaging. Indeed, if taught properly, they are a great deal of fun. The other is that decision-forcing cases do a far better job of imparting factual knowledge than teaching methods that are solely concerned with the delivery of facts.



The Case Study as History

A case study is a work of history. That is, it is a deliberate examination of a series of closely related events that took place at some time in the past. Thus, each time a student learns something by means of a case study, he is also learning a little bit about past events. Moreover, because he is looking at those events with a critical eye, he is also learning the art of making sense of past events.

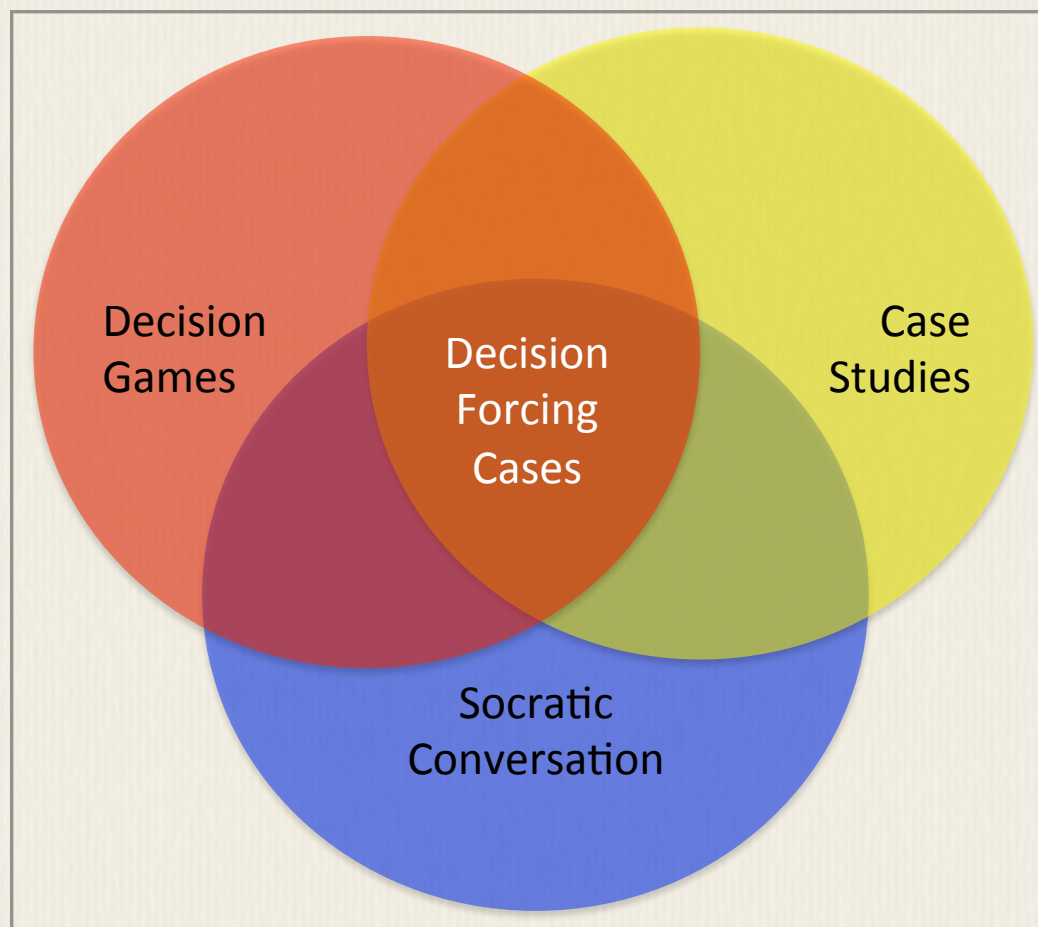
Because a case study is a work of history, those who learn by means of the case method obtain many of the benefits enjoyed by those who study history in other ways. The first of these benefits is knowledge of “the permanent things”, those aspects of life that, if they change at all, change very slowly. (These include geography, human nature, and the essential nature of such things as war, business, government, and education.) In addition to this, the study of history (and thus the study of any subject by means of the case method) provides a person with a rich stock of analogies; knowledge of how (and, what is even more valuable, why) the techniques, procedures, and conventions of his field were established; and freedom from what might be called “temporal parochialism.” (That is, the student of history knows things that belong to times other than his own, and so benefits from a type of sophistication that is analogous to that of a person who has done a great deal of traveling.)

The benefits of learning history by means of the case method are enjoyed by both those who use decision-forcing cases and those who use retrospective cases.



Case Discussion

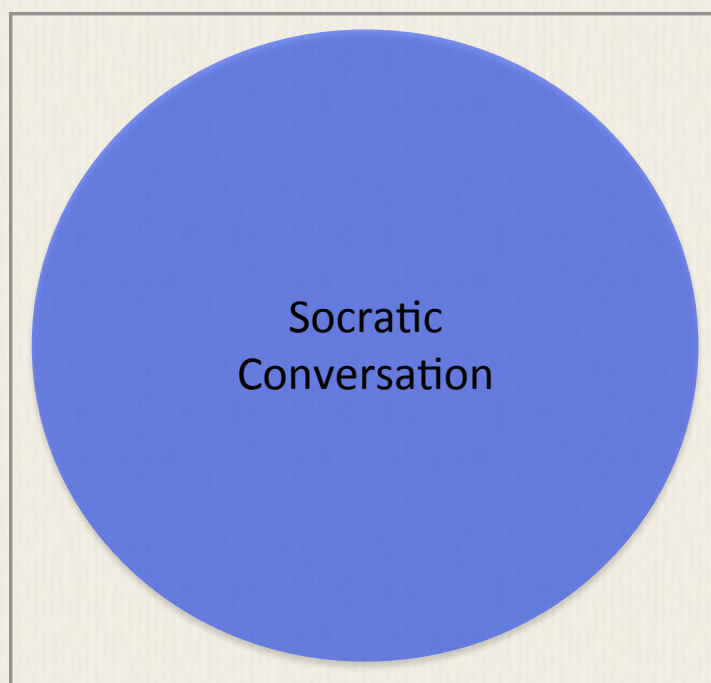
The teaching of a decision-forcing case has two essential elements. The first of this is the presentation of the problem. The second is the discussion of the problem. The presentation of the problem can take a variety of forms. It can, for example, be something (such as an article, a collection of documents, a podcast, or a film) that students examine before class. Alternatively, it could be something (such as a short lecture or multi-media presentation) that takes place at the start of class. The discussion of the problem, however, can only take one form, that of a Socratic conversation.



Socratic Conversation

A Socratic conversation consists of three steps. First, the teacher starts the discussion by means of a ‘cold call’. (This involves selecting a student, putting him in the role of the protagonist of the case, and asking him to answer a decision-forcing question.) Second, the teacher uses a variety of questions to draw other students into the discussion. (These include, but are not limited to, asking another student to answer the original question, asking one student to critique the answer offered by another, or asking a student to explain a particular fact or concept.) Third, the teacher takes on the role of moderator, managing the dynamics of the discussion in order to draw out a wide variety of viewpoints and considerations. (A good rule of thumb for this part of the Socratic conversation is to continue until students have laid out all of the courses of action that were, or might reasonably have been, considered by the real-life decision-maker.)

There is, however, much more to a Socratic conversation than a simple sequence of questions. In order to succeed at his task, the teacher must become what Benjamin Franklin called the ‘humble inquirer’. That is, he must be genuinely interested in the solutions and opinions offered up by his students, and maintain an open mind as he asks them to offer up, defend, and refine their ideas.



Many experienced case teachers find that a technique known as ‘paraphrasing’ is a great aid in maintaining an attitude of humble inquiry in the course of a Socratic discussion. That is, they cultivate the habit of automatically responding to a student’s solution with a concise restatement of what the student said. This technique has the added benefit of giving other students a second chance to hear their classmates solution. Better yet, it lets students know the the teacher is actively listening to what they said.

Another technique that helps a case teacher maintain the right sort of attitude during a Socratic conversation is a posture of strict neutrality. That is, rather than offering his own views, the teacher asks additional questions. Some of these may be followup questions directed at the student who has just expressed an opinion. Others will be requests that other students comment upon what their classmate has just said.

Whatever techniques he uses, the teacher must scrupulously avoid giving the impression that his purpose in asking difficult questions is to make students feel stupid or inadequate. Similarly, he must avoid doing things that lead students to believe that, rather than fully engaging the solutions offered by students, he is merely warming up the class for the unveiling of his own opinions. In other words, a case teacher must avoid both sarcasm and pedantry.

Benjamin Franklin on the Socratic Attitude

“While I was intent on improving my language, I met with an English grammar (I think it was Greenwood's), at the end of which there were two little sketches of the arts of rhetoric and logic, the latter finishing with a specimen of a dispute in the Socratic method; and soon after I procured Xenophon's Memorable Things of Socrates, wherein there are many instances of the same method. I was charmed with it, adopted it, dropped my abrupt contradiction and positive argumentation, and put on the humble inquirer. “

Source: Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, (Philadelphia: J.D. Lippencott, 1868), page 99