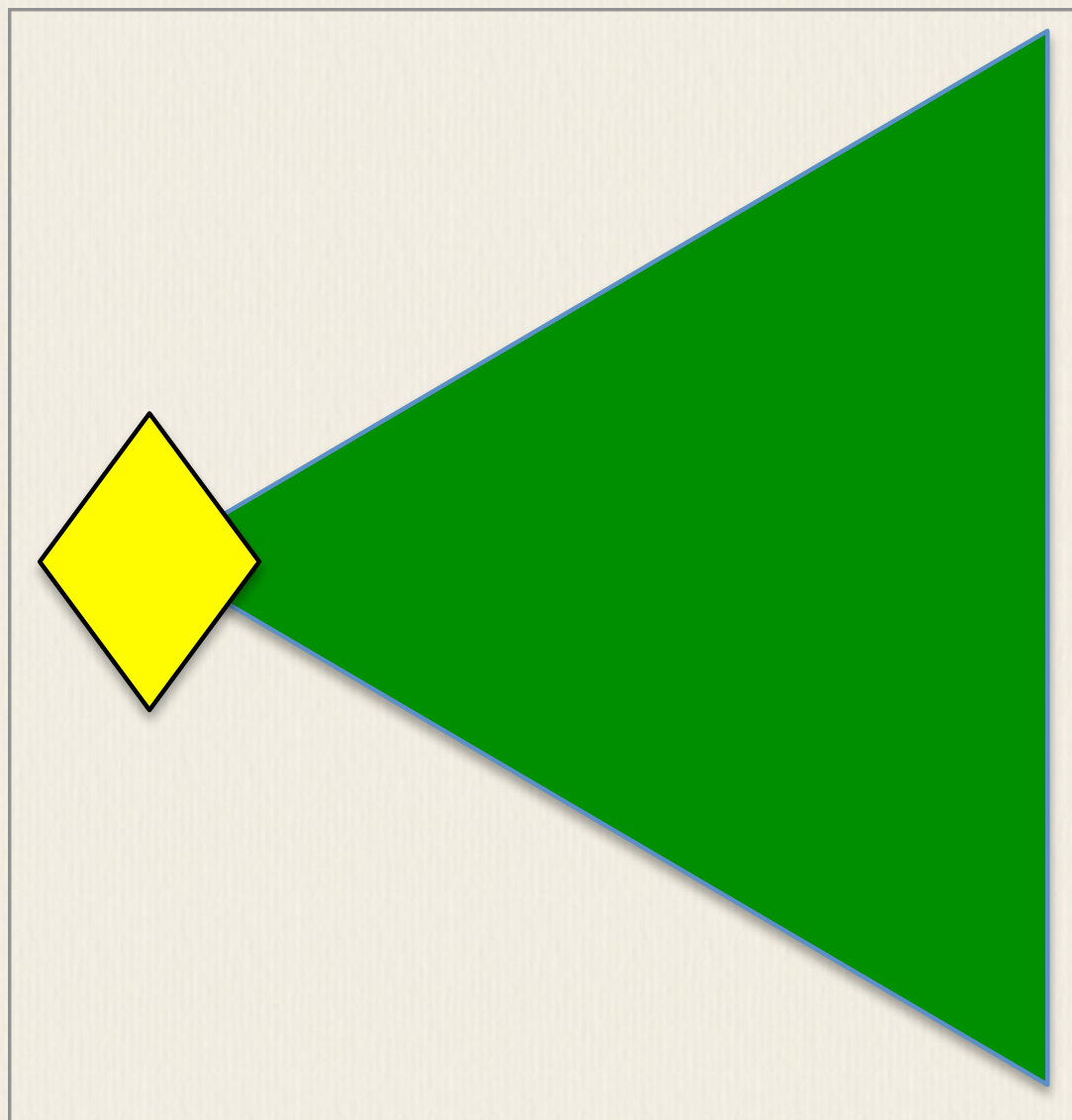




Retrospective Case Studies



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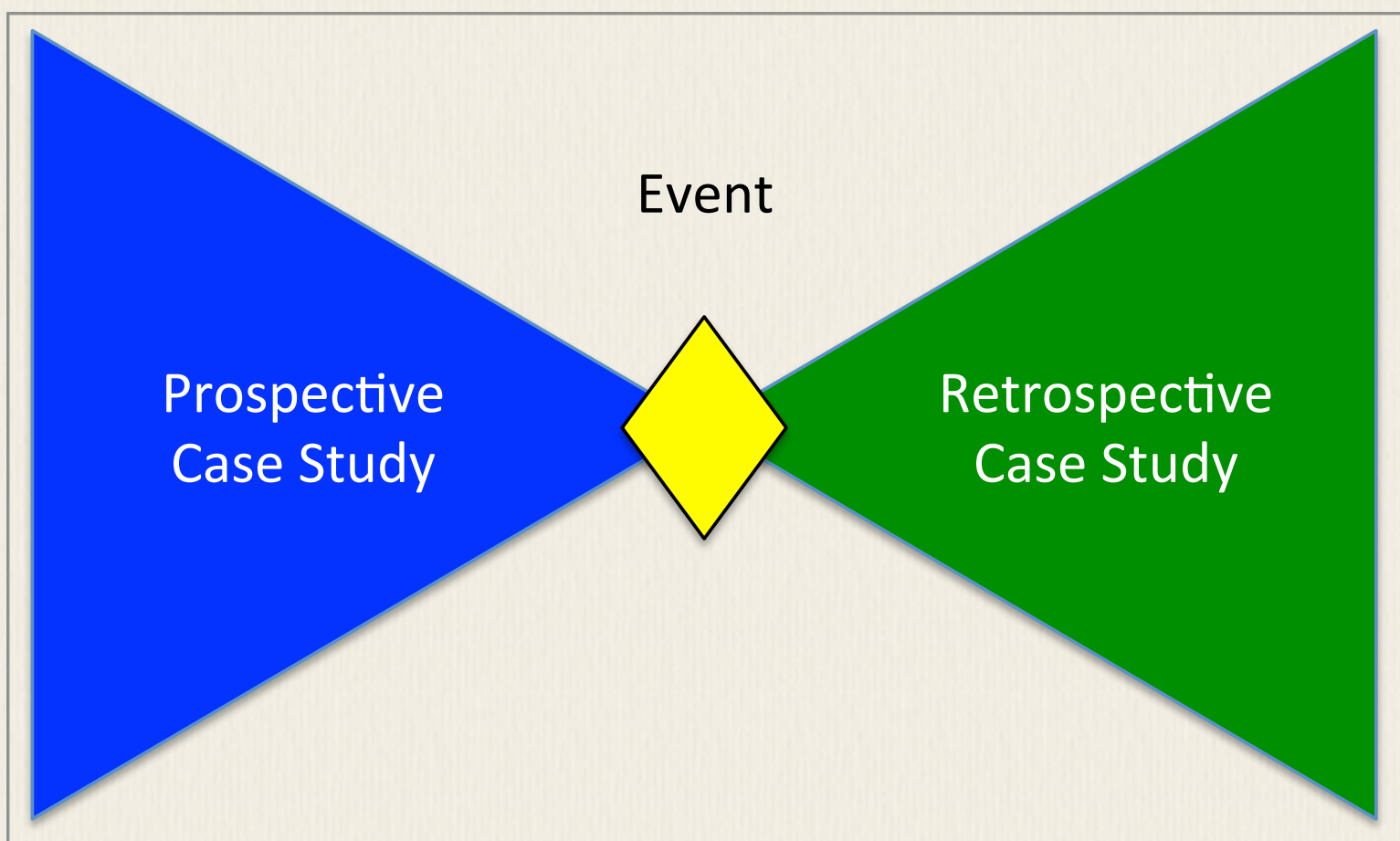
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Case Studies

A case study is an instructional exercise that asks students to examine a particular event. It serves neither to endorse nor condemn the decisions made in the course of that event. Rather, its purpose is to provide vicarious experience that allows students to hone their professional judgement.

If a case study provides students with the outcome of the decisions at the heart of a case, then it is a ‘retrospective’ case study. If this examination is made without the benefit of hindsight, then the case study is called a ‘prospective’ case study. (A ‘prospective’ case study is also called a ‘decision-forcing case’.)

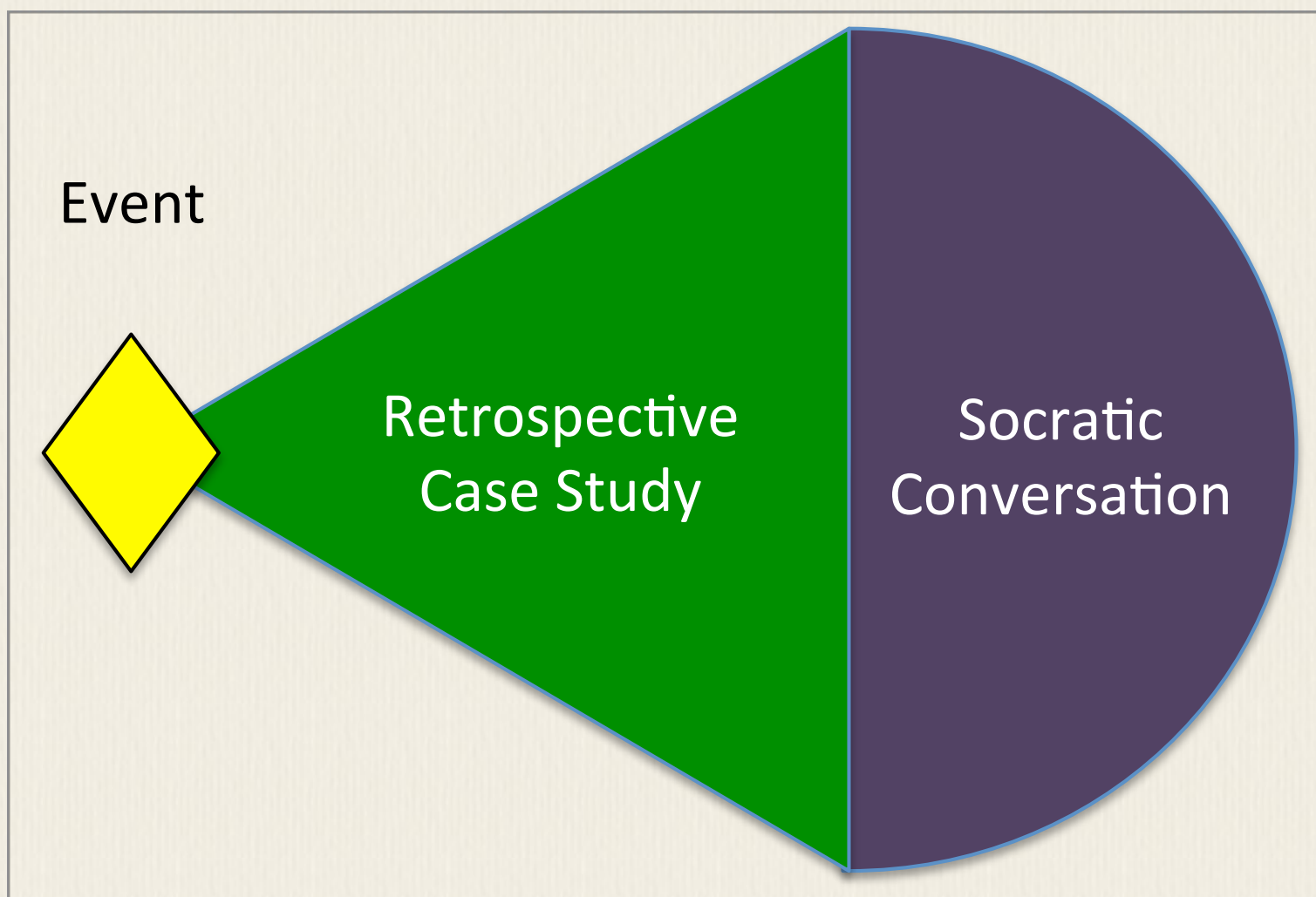
A student discussing a retrospective case study places himself outside of the events in question. That is, he takes the role of an impartial observer who benefits from knowledge that was not available to people involved in the actual event. In particular, the student discussing a retrospective case study already knows how the story ends.



Case Discussion

The teaching of a retrospective case study has two essential elements. The first of these is the description of the event. The second is the discussion of the problems at the heart of the case. The description of the event can take a variety of forms. It can, for example be something, whether an article, an e-book, or a film, that students examine before class. Alternatively, the description of the event 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 can also take a number of forms. Most of these are variants of a technique that is also used with decision-forcing cases, a technique known as ‘the Socratic conversation’.



Socratic Conversation

A Socratic conversation is made up of a series of shorter discussions, each of which consists of three steps. These steps are:

- the ‘cold call’
- ‘recruitment’
- ‘moderation’

A ‘cold call’ is a searching and highly specific question that the teacher asks of a particular student. It may take the form of a speculative question. (‘What would you have done if you had been the decision-maker in this case?’) It may also take the form of a request for a summary of the case. (‘What is this case about?’) Finally, it may take the form of a request for an evaluation. (‘What is the problem at the heart of this case?’) A ‘cold call’ should not, however, take the form of a question that merely asks for a general impression or a vague opinion. (‘What do you think of the case?’)

Having made the ‘cold call’, the teacher listens to the answer of the student. He then responds by asking the student for clarification, paraphrasing the answer, or asking a followup question. The teacher does not, however, offer a critique of the student’s answer. Rather, a good case teacher refrains from expressing his own point of view until the very end of the Socratic conversation. Indeed, he takes pains to avoid any utterance, gesture, or facial expression that might betray his opinions to his students.

After completing the ‘cold call’, the teacher uses a variety of questions to draw other students into the discussion. These ‘recruiting questions’ may 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.

As soon as several students have been recruited into the discussion, the teacher takes on the role of moderator. As such, his job is to keep the discussion alive, ensure that as many students as possible participate in the discussion, and to encourage the airing of multiple viewpoints.

At times, the teacher may decide to ‘play the devil’s advocate’ in order to argue positions that, while reasonable, seem to be missing from the discussion. As a rule, however, the teacher is much more likely to serve in a strictly neutral role. That is, he will be a restrainer of ramblers, a recruiter of the reticent, and a referee to the rambunctious.

Once a particular question has been discussed to the satisfaction of the teacher, the cycle begins anew with a different question and a fresh ‘cold call’.

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. “

Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus, 1895), pp. 42.

The Socratic Attitude

There is 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.

The Last Word

In many forms of teaching, the teacher feels obliged to ‘have the last word’. Indeed, the custom of ending a class with a summation of some sort is so well-established that, on those rare occasions where teachers fail to conclude a class with an authoritative answer or ‘school solution’, students are likely to feel cheated.

In the Socratic style of case teaching, however, the teacher is under no obligation to provide a summary of any sort. After all, his purpose in teaching is neither to impart settled knowledge nor to impose his opinions. Rather, the purpose of the case teacher is to help students hone their professional judgement on the whetstone of real-world events, and that purpose is rarely served by the reduction of the ‘lessons learned’ to a proverb, catch phrase, or a series of bullet points.

This does not mean that a case teacher should always refrain from providing a wrap up. If a case is part of a series, the teacher can make comments (or, better yet, ask questions) that connect the case just studied to the case that is coming up. If the case teacher is particularly adept at such things, he can end the case discussion with a ‘Twilight Zone twist’, a comment or question that challenges the consensus just achieved in the course of the preceding discussion.