

The Photoelectric Effect in Photocells

Suggested Level: High School Physics or Chemistry Classes

LEARNING OUTCOME

After engaging in background reading on electromagnetic energy and exploring the frequencies of various colors of light, students realize that it is useful to think of light waves as streams of particles called quanta, and understand that the energy of each quantum depends on its frequency.

LESSON OVERVIEW

This lesson introduces students to the photoelectric effect (the basic physical phenomenon underlying the operation of photovoltaic cells) and the role of quanta of various frequencies of electromagnetic energy in producing it. The inadequacy of the wave theory of light in explaining photovoltaic effects is explored, as is the ionization energies for elements in the third row of the periodic table.

MATERIALS

- Student handout
- Roll of masking tape
- Ball of yarn
- Scrap paper

SAFETY

- There are no safety precautions for this lesson.

TEACHING THE LESSON

Begin by explaining the structure and operation of photovoltaic cells, covering the information in the student handout and drawing from the background information below. Stake off an area of the classroom in which about two-thirds of your students can stand. It could, for example, be bounded by tape on the floor. This area is to represent a photovoltaic cell. Have half of your students form a line dividing the area in half. They represent the electrons lined up on the p -side of the p - n junction. Stretch yarn from the n -type semiconductor to one student chosen to represent a light bulb and from that student to the p -type semiconductor. The remaining half of the students represent photons. They should each hold a wad of scrap paper, which represents energy.

When they are given the signal, the “photon” students are to give their wad of paper (representing energy) to an “electron” lined up on the p -side of the p - n junction. This energizes the electron on the p -side of the p - n junction to cross the junction into the n -type semiconductor, and it sets it into flight through the circuit. The “electron” student then is to trace the path of the yarn, giving the wad of paper to the “light bulb” student (representing the lighting of the bulb) en route before returning to the p -type conductor side of the photovoltaic cell. The “light bulb” student throws the wad of paper into a receptacle (to represent that the light bulb needs to be furnished energy on a continuous basis in order to stay lit).

After they return to the photovoltaic cell (via the p -type semiconductor side), “electron” students are to line up on the p -side of the p - n junction until they receive another wad of paper (representing energy) from a “photon” student, and “photon” students are to go back for more wads of paper to represent additional energy given to the electrons the second time around.

ACCEPTABLE STUDENT RESPONSES

Analyze your students' essays on the basis of presence of the main points covered by the simulation.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Atoms of the light elements in group 14 (carbon, silicon, and germanium) have four outermost or valence electrons. When these atoms form a solid lattice, they bond to each other covalently to form four covalent bonds of electron pairs, one from each of the two bonding atoms.

The electron energy levels in a lattice of bonded atoms are described not in terms of single energy levels but rather in terms of continuous bands, which can be considered to be equivalent to the energy levels associated with each single atom grouped together to form a continuum. There are two bands of energies that are of interest in describing the electrical properties of the lattice of bonded atoms: the *valence band*, at a lower energy, and the *conduction band*, at a higher energy. Between the two bands is a gap. Most of the electrons in a lattice of bonded atoms from group 14 are in the valence band—only a few are likely to be in the conduction band, where they are free to move and conduct an electric current when a voltage is applied. For this reason, lattices of bonded atoms in group 14 are semiconductors of electricity.

By themselves, lattices of bonded carbon, silicon, or germanium atoms don't conduct much electric current or enable any of the miracles of solid-state electronics, which include photovoltaic electricity. Making a photovoltaic cell requires "doping" lattices of group 14 atoms (usually silicon, though germanium, which is more expensive, can be used)—by inserting atoms from groups 13 and 15 into them.

Atoms of group 15 have *five* outermost or valence electrons. If they are inserted to take the place of a group 14 atom, there will be one additional valence electron. Since the valence band of electron energies is already filled in a bonded lattice of group 14 atoms, this additional valence electron has no other energy level to fill except one in the conduction band. Because this added electron adds negative charge to what had previously occupied the conduction band, a bonded lattice of group 14 atoms "doped" with atoms of a group 15 element is called an n-type semiconductor. (See Figure 1 below.)

Likewise, atoms of group 13 have only *three* outermost or valence electrons. Doping a lattice of bonded group 14 atoms with them will reduce the number of electrons in the lattice. This results in "holes" in the valence band, which can have the same ability to conduct electricity as electrons in the conduction band. Because these holes add positive charge to what had previously occupied the valence band, a bonded lattice of group 14 atoms doped with atoms of a group 13 element is called a *p*-type semiconductor. (See Figure 1.)

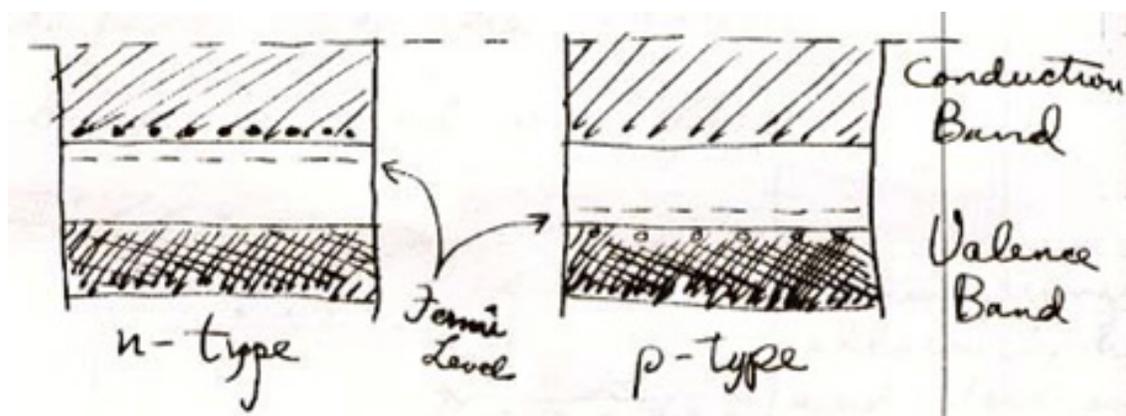


Figure 1

A photocell is formed by doping a bonded lattice of group 14 atoms so that one end is an n -type semiconductor and the other end is a p -type semiconductor. Initially, the electron energy level that is 50% occupied (with higher percentage occupation below and lower percentage occupation above) is higher in the n -type semiconductor end than in the p -type semiconductor end. (This symbolic energy level, called the *Fermi level*, is named after Enrico Fermi, whose name is connected with the statistics associated with electron spin.)

However, transient flow of conduction electrons in the n -type end and holes in the p -type end “equalize” the Fermi level at both ends. This flow of electrons and holes into the “opposite” region of the bonded lattice of group 14 atoms also sets up an electric field to oppose further flow of electrons and holes. Associated with this field is a “barrier” electric potential, which causes the energy levels of the conduction and valence bands to shift in one region relative to the other. (See Figure 2.)

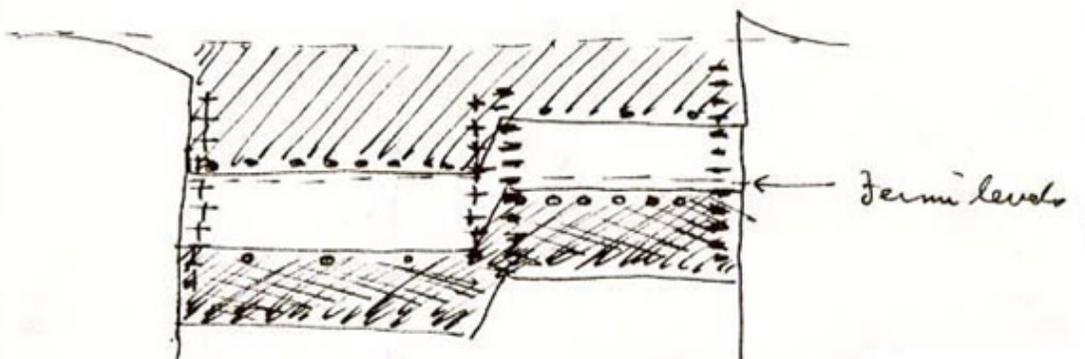


Figure 2

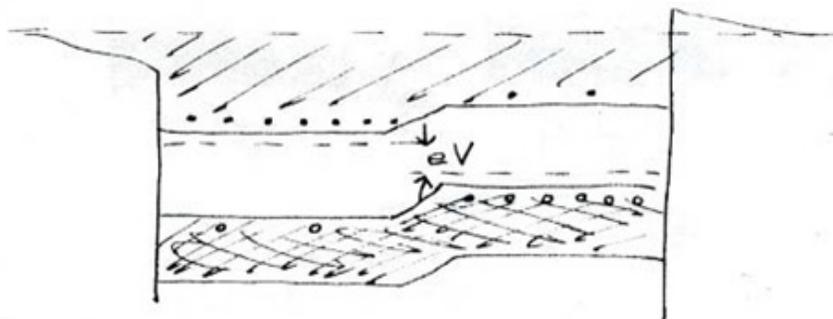


Figure 3

The incidence of light onto the material reduces this barrier potential, causing the Fermi level in the n -type end to rise above that in the p -type end. But the conduction band in the n -type end is still lower than in the p -type end. Because of the remaining barrier potential, conduction electrons in the n -type end cannot flow into the p -type end, but they can flow through a circuit and meet up with holes in the p -type end on the other side. In the process of doing this, they lose energy equal to the difference of the Fermi levels in the two ends of the photocell, just as they would lose energy received from a battery. Thus, light on the photocell is equivalent to a battery whose voltage equals the difference in Fermi levels at the two ends of the photocell. (See Figure 3.)

(STUDENT HANDOUT FOLLOWS)

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photocell, just as they would in flowing from the negative terminal of a battery to the positive terminal. And the energy they have gained from the sunlight is just like the energy that electrons get from a battery. (See Figure 2.)

Cross Section Diagram of a Photovoltaic Cell

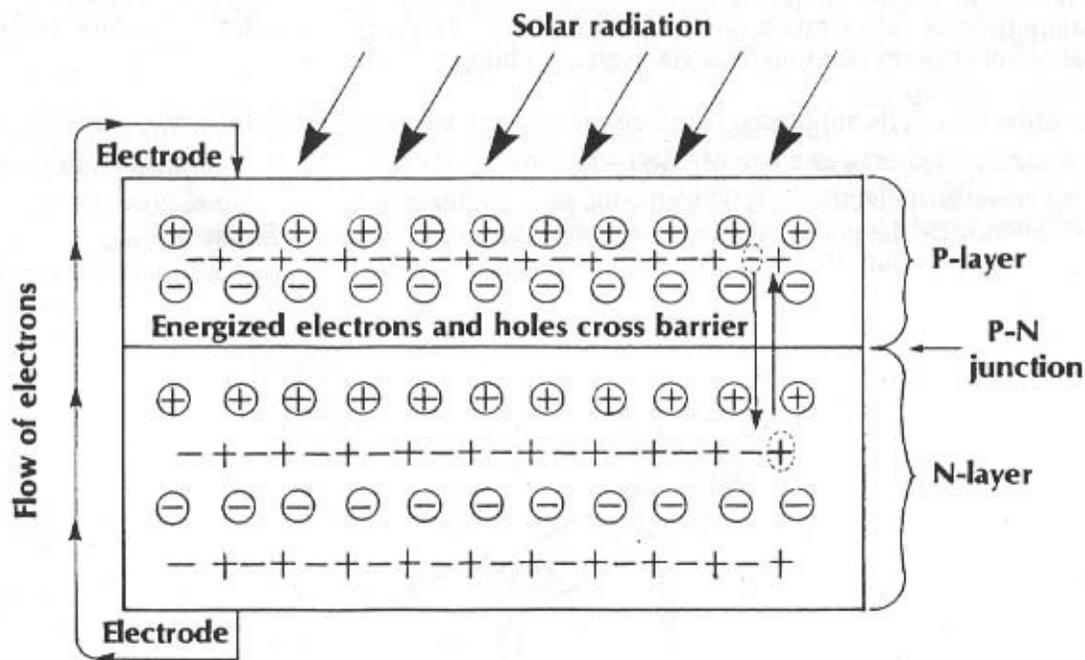


Figure 2

DEVELOP YOUR UNDERSTANDING: The following simulation is designed to enable you to experience the roles of components of a photovoltaic cell and the way it operates.

1. Your teacher will stake off an area of the classroom in which about half the students can stand. It could, for example, be bounded by tape on the floor. This area is to represent a photovoltaic cell.
2. These students form a line dividing the area in half. They represent the electrons lined up on the positive side of the *p-n* junction.
3. Yarn is to be stretched from the *n*-type semiconductor to one student chosen to represent a light bulb and from that student to the *p*-type semiconductor.
4. The remaining half of the students represent photons. They should each hold a wad of scrap paper, which represents energy. When they are given the signal, the “photon” students are to give their wad of paper (representing energy) to an “electron” student lined up on the *p*-side of the *p-n* junction. This energizes the electron on the *p*-side of the *p-n* junction to cross the junction into the *n*-type semiconductor, and it sets it into flight through the circuit. The “electron” student then is to trace the path of the yarn, giving the wad of paper to the “light

bulb” student (representing the lighting of the bulb) en route before returning to the *p*-type conductor side of the photovoltaic cell. The “light bulb” student throws the wad of paper into a receptacle (to represent that the light bulb needs to be furnished energy on a continuous basis in order to stay lit).

5. After they return to the photovoltaic cell (via the *p*-type semiconductor side), “electron” students are to line up on the *p*-side of the *p-n* junction until they receive another wad of paper (representing energy) from a “photon” student, and “photon” students are to go back for more wads of paper to represent additional energy given to the electrons the second time around.
6. On the basis of the simulation experience, compose an essay that relates the principles of atomic structure to the operation of a photovoltaic cell.