

# SWAP SESSION NEWSLETTER

No. 3

1-26-98

Topic- Charles Bonwell's Workshop: Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom

Bonwell's goals were to answer the following questions:

1. What is active learning and why is it important?
2. What are the barriers?
3. How can those barriers be overcome?

Bonwell provided a working definition of active learning:

\*Active learning is having students doing things and thinking about the things they are doing. (They reflect on the process.)

\*Active learning is an explicit process. (You have to do it yourself to understand it.)

---

He also provided a conceptual framework of active learning in the form of a continuum. Bonwell defines simple tasks as short and typically unstructured, while complex activities are of longer duration and are planned and structured.

SIMPLE-----COMPLEX  
TASKS TASKS

Other points about the continuum emphasized by Bonwell:

\*We all need to be on the continuum in some way.

\*Our goal is to look at who we are as teachers and decide what we can do to get students involved in some way that is meaningful.

In a study conducted by J. Thomas (1972) concerning student retention of material presented in lecture, he found that the best time to present material when the goal is for students to hear and process the material is 8-10 minutes into the lecture. After that, it degrades until the end of class, at which time students again focus to listen for the next assignment, quiz, etc. The human mind cannot stay focused for an entire class period.

Bonwell emphasized that the teaching method we choose is contextual. It depends on the goal that we have for our students. A summary written by W.J. McKeachie, et.al., reports the effectiveness of lecture and discussion (active learning) for achieving different outcomes.

Results were as follows:

\*If the goal is to transmit information, 7 of 12 studies agree that lecture is the preferable method.

\*If the goal is higher order thinking, 4 of 5 studies agree that discussion is preferable to lecture.

\*If the goal is to motivate students toward continued learning, 5 of 5 say that discussion is preferable to lecture.

Bonwell explained the following "wait time" study:

Concept of wait time: The average amount of time that exists between the time an instructor asks a question and then speaks is 1.2 seconds. By waiting 3-5 seconds (or even longer with a complex question), then the quality and quantity of student responses will go up.

### BARRIERS TO ACTIVE LEARNING:

- |                              |                                 |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| *Time                        | *Student resistance             |
| *Class size                  | *Environment                    |
| *Too much content to cover   | *Losing control                 |
| *Lack of student preparation | *Unfamiliarity with the process |
| *Preconceived notions        | *Dominating students            |

Bonwell provided the following statement and then asked the workshop participants to discuss the two questions seen below the statement.

A colleague says, "I would use active learning, but there is too much content to cover."

1. What assumptions or values are inherent in such a statement?
2. Are there alternative perspectives to these assumptions and values?

### Values and assumptions:

- Just because you covered the material means they have learned it
- The faculty member is the active person
- No content will be learned during active learning
- The only way students can learn is through lecture
- The faculty member is the expert.
- The lesson is valued more than the student.

### Alternative views we can hold:

- Active learning can occur outside of the classroom through group projects, research topics, and journaling.
- A discussion group can be set up through a list serve.
- Have students be responsible for learning that material at the basic knowledge level, so that the evaluative material can be learned in class through active learning.
- We need to review content for applicability and appropriateness.

Bonwell's Risk Model: The classroom use of active learning methods always involves some level of risk. The risks may be categorized into two groups: Student Risks and Faculty Risks.

There are risks that the students will not:

1. actively participate
2. use higher order thinking skills
3. enjoy the experience
4. learn sufficient course content

There are risks that you as a faculty member will not:

1. feel in control of the class
2. feel self-confident
3. possess the needed skills
4. be viewed by others as teaching in an established fashion

Bonwell believes that one can maximize his or her likelihood of success with active learning by selecting only those activities which are at a personally comfortable risk level. Low risk strategies are short, structured, and well-planned.

---

#### ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES TO USE IN THE CLASSROOM:

1. **Bonwell's Enhanced Lecture-** This consists of a series of mini-lectures interspersed with activities. For example, the professor could start with a mini-lecture over a topic and then have students do an activity that helps determine if they "get it". If they do, an extension of the topic can be presented. If they don't, a corrective lecture can be presented.

2. **Short Writes-** Have students respond to you in writing. Examples include:  
\*One minute papers: Students answer two questions. What did you learn?  
What was the muddiest point of the lecture today?

\*Students write down an explanation or example that the instructor should have given in class but didn't.

\*Students write a summary of key points made that day.

3. **Brainstorming-** Students brainstorm solutions to problems, creative responses, knowledge of the day's topic, etc.

4. **Formative Quiz-** This is an ungraded quiz that can be used as the basis for discussion or as a check of student progress. It also allows students to see what your questions will be like on upcoming exams.

5. **Fishbowl-** A group of students does a demonstration or participates in a discussion, and the rest of the class observes and reflects in writing.

6. Guided lecture- Bonwell explains that the professor lectures for 20 minutes, and the students are not allowed to take notes during this time. At the end of the 20 minutes, the students are given 5 minutes to write down everything they remember about the lecture. Students then get into groups and work to reconstruct the lecture. The entire class discusses the lecture toward the end of the period.

7. Bonwell's Responsive lecture- If a class meets 3 times a week, the professor lectures 2 of the 3 days. On the last day of the week, the students ask any questions they might have, but they have to justify the importance of their questions. The professor writes the questions on the board and then asks students to rank them according to importance. The remainder of the class time is spent discussing the top-ranked questions.

Bonwell identifies five roles that we play in the classroom: Expert, Questioner, Manager, Facilitator, and Nurturer

The roles most commonly associated with active learning are those of Facilitator and Nurturer.

He states that it is important to know which roles are weaknesses and continue to work on these.

Creating a supportive environment is crucial. How do we lessen the risks for our students?

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| *Share expectations                           | *Be fair                                  |
| *Use humor                                    | *Share difficulties                       |
| *Be available for students                    | *Use praise/ rewards                      |
| *Know student names                           | *Be respectful                            |
| *Ask open-ended questions                     | *Engage students outside of the classroom |
| *Ask questions about student viewpoints       | *Know names of students                   |
| *Refer to "our" class and what "we" are doing | *Create opportunities for success         |
| *Include students in decision-making          |   |

J. Lowman studied 26 CASE Award winners who were honored for their excellence in teaching. He wondered what made them unique. He found the following:

1. These instructors created intellectual excitement in the classroom.
2. They also created interpersonal rapport.

Bonwell emphasized that we must become experts in content, teaching methods, group dynamics, and learning styles.

*One must learn by doing the thing, for though you think you know it-- You have no certainty until you try.*

-Sophocles, 5th c. B.C.