Workers' School – Dialectical Materialism Lesson Plan

Lesson Overview

Lesson Contents

This document is designed to enable the teaching and promote the study of the scientific ideology of dialectical materialism at an introductory level. This **Lesson Overview** gives you an understanding of the teaching responsibilities and expected outcomes for this lesson, along with helpful reminders.

The **Lesson Outline** gives a suggested structure for how this lesson should be taught. However, the undertaking of this plan in your concrete circumstances will like require creative application to meet the specific needs of your classroom.

The **Dialectical Materialism Handout** is a take-home resource for students, including important definitions and overviews of concepts discussed in the lesson. It is to be given to students at a point specified in the Lesson Outline and should serve as a study reference rather than a crutch.

Teaching Responsibilities

The Workers' School stresses the importance of allowing proletarian leadership to emerge whenever possible. As workers become more vocal and take on more responsibility for their learning, do not restrict this development; allow them to become their own teachers. Rely on volunteer selection for tasks/answers as needed, but commit to increasing each student's participation as the lesson progresses.

Encourage discussion from all attendees to gain an understanding of the material circumstances and political development of each participant. Use this understanding to guide and shape the lesson. Adapt the conceptual sophistication of your lesson according to the political sophistication of your students. Show sincerity to each student's interests, capabilities, and the resolution of their concerns.

Promote comradely criticism of other student's contributions. Never hesitate to allow the class to engage in two-line struggle to organically resolve disagreements or correct deviations. If the class is unable to do so on its own, be prepared to step in and correct deviations yourself.

Expected Student Takeaways

- An introduction and/or thorough review of the fundamental aspects of dialectical materialism, including its universal dynamics, and particular differences from other philosophical outlooks
- An initial experience of the dialectical process of knowledge creation, by taking their own workplace experiences through a cycle of the concrete-abstract dialectic
- A feeling of empowerment to begin applying the dialectical-materialist process to their own life

Lesson Outline

1. Introductory Discussion

The point of this section is to get your classroom prepared for learning and engaged in discussion, by tapping into their concrete experiences at work.

- Begin by asking about conditions at work. Have students volunteer to share their concerns about their workplaces or working conditions. Encourage everyone to participate in sharing their own experiences.
  - *Note the similarities/differences discussed (universal/particular aspects of wage labour)*

- Once you're satisfied with your understanding of the students' concerns at work (ideally everyone has shared), ask them to identify the primary issue in common across all of their jobs.
  - *Use your judgment to decide when to step in and nudge the class' answers in a Marxist direction, or stand back and allow them to find the correct conclusion themselves. The latter is almost always preferable.*

2. What is Contradiction?

The point of this section is to introduce the concept of contradiction to your class and use it to bring clarity to the preceding discussion on workplace issues.

- Start the discussion by noting the existence of similarities between everyone's answers (ex. *We all have disagreements with the way our bosses operate)*
  - *Ask the students why they think this is the case*? *Is it simply one big coincidence? Is it due to random chance? Or are there shared underlying material phenomena that shape the circumstances of our lives?*

- Explain that the basis of these similarities is the contradiction inherent within all things. Understanding contradiction allows us to find patterns (*trouble with bosses or at workplaces*) within seemingly different things (*the wide range of jobs the students hold*), while still allowing for individual differences in each of these scenarios (*the specific problems they have with their specific boss/workplace*)
  - *Ask the class what contradiction means to them, and after allowing for a thorough conversation, share the scientific definition provided on the Handout.*
  - *Ask about examples of contradictions, and list your own (ex. opposing viewpoints in an argument, boss vs. workers, life and death, war and peace, up and down, stop and go, + and –, etc.). Make clear how contradiction is necessary for existence in each of these cases (i.e. there's no 'up' without 'down).*

- Outline to the class that “we've acknowledged the problems we have in our workplaces, but we don't want to stop there: we want to change our working conditions for the better.” Ask them whether contradiction prevents or encourages change?
  - *If possible, have the class break into smaller groups to discuss this question. After sufficient time has passed, give each group an opportunity to share the answer they've arrived at, then have those with differing answers. If the class is too small for this, have each individual share their thoughts instead.*

3. Dialectical Materialism Concept Breakdown

The point of this section is to introduce dialectical materialism, by explaining the context/meaning of the philosophy's (rather imposing) name, to understand what it means before we explain how it works.

- Introduce dialectical materialism as an outlook for understanding how the world (and the things that make up the world) change and develop.
  - *Explain to students that it can be difficult and intimidating, that it takes time to understand it, as this is the opposite of how we're taught to think. Encourage them that their understanding will deepen as the dialectical materialist process is applied to study of Workers' School subjects, and their own lives.*

- Ask the class for their understanding/definitions of the following concepts, guiding from the (likely) colloquial answers they give, towards the scientific definitions in the Handout. Discuss the contradiction between each pair once they've both been defined.
  - *Do this exercise for the following dialectical pairs:*
    - *Idea and matter, idealism and materialism, and dialectics and mechanical thinking*

- Define dialectical materialism for the class, based on the context provided by the previous definitions exercise, now that they should understand what both the 'dialectical' and 'materialism' aspects of the term mean.
  - *Use the definition for dialectical materialism provided in the handout*

- Distribute handout to students
  - *Explain to them that they should use this as a study reference rather than a crutch; being able to recite the definitions is useless unless you understand what they mean, and how to apply them to novel circumstances.*

4. Dialectical Materialism Explanation + Examples

The point of this section is to explain some of the principal and secondary aspects of dialectical materialism, introducing dialectical thinking and how we can apply them practically via these aspects.

- Introduce contradiction as the sole and principal law of contradiction and dialetical materialism
  1. The universality of contradiction
  2. The particularity of contradiction
  3. Principal and secondary contradictions
  4. Principal and secondary aspects of one contradiction

  - *Note these four aspects are taken from Mao's On Contradiction. Not every single aspect of contradiction from that text is explained here, as other aspects are too advanced for a first-time lesson. It is advised to read that whole essay (~30 pages), as well as Mao's Five Essays, for a more thorough explanation of each point.*

- After introducing these points give examples for each, from both political economy and the natural sciences.
  - *Examples are listed on the handout but you are encouraged to think of and share your own.*
  - *Probe for examples from the class, and get them break off into groups to discuss/make lists of examples, if the class is large enough, before coming back to discuss them as a group.*

5. Dialectical Materialist Knowledge Production + Conclusion

The point of this section is to return to students' working conditions with their new understanding of the dialectical materialist outlook, to see what new insights and clarity can be gained. It also involves introducing the concrete-abstract dialectic of knowledge production, to reveal how this has been utilized throughout the class.

- Return to the initial workplace/working conditions problems that were raised. How can we use dialectical materialism to deepen our understanding of these problems?
  - *Ask students to apply the dialectical-materialist outlook to their working conditions; what connections might affect these conditions? How have working conditions changed over the past few years due to internal and external factors? Are there any relevant instances of quantitative changes turning into qualitative changes? What about how contradictions are driving the development (or deterioration) of working conditions?*

- Once this discussion comes to a natural close, introduce the concrete-abstract dialectic of knowledge production to the class. Show how the class has passed through several iterations of this to deepen their knowledge of their own working conditions and dialectical materialism:
  - *Initial working conditions discussion (concrete); the concept of contradiction (abstract); examples of contradictions (concrete); intro of dialectical materialism (abstract); examples of dialectical outlook aspects + return to working conditions (concrete), etc.*

- Conclude lesson, thanking workers for attending and showing interest in the scientific ideology of dialectical materialism. Encourage them to attend future Workers' School sessions, join the WUF if they're not already a member, and to talk to their co-workers about working conditions, organizing, etc.

Workers' School Dialectical Materialism Handout

Key Definitions

- **Contradiction:** A contradiction is a phenomenon in which two conflicting forces emerge in a thing or process, which are inherently in opposition to each other. Contradictions can be either internal or external. Internal contradictions, the splitting of a single whole into its contradictory parts whiich struggle with each other, is almost always more important than an external contradiction, where outside forces struggle with something. A contradiction will, and must, be resolved through the struggle of its contradictory aspects. After the resolution of a contradiction, the thing, process, or system will become its opposite, wherein a new contradiction takes over.

- **Matter:** The substance that makes up all things in the material world. Matter can exist in different states: solids, liquids, gasses; and is constantly in motion and changing all the time.

- **Idea:** Ideas are a reflection of the material reality around us, and are informed by existing social systems. Ideas under capitalism are informed by the capitalist system, its incentive structure, and how goods are produced and distributed under it. New ideas will be formed under socialism and communism, just as old ideas, which have since mostly been overcome, were formed in previous systems such as the feudal system with the monarchy and slave society.

- **Idealism:** The philosophical position according to which the mind is principal over matter. Subjective reality is seen as fundamental, with the material world being a reflection of the mind.

- **Materialism:** The philosophical position according to which matter is principal over mind. Objective reality is taken as fundamental, with the mind and ideas a reflection of the material world. Idealism/materialism is the fundamental contradiction in philosophy, and the Marxist view is that materialism is the scientifically correct position.

- **Dialectics:** A philosophical outlook of observing and analyzing changes in ideas, processes, and systems through their internal contradictions. In dialectics, development occurs *because* of the tension and conflict of contradiction, not in spite of it. Dialectics can be either idealist; focused primarily on ideas or abstract concepts, or materialist; focused primarily on the material world and matter.

- **Mechanical Thinking:** A philosophical method assuming either an unchanging world of static objects, or one changing on a smooth forward trajectory rooted not in contradiction but in things 'just being the way they are.' From this type of thinking emerges ideas like reality as merely a concept in the brain, or that nothing can really be proven, both of which are incorrect.

- **Dialectical Materialism:** The Marxist outlook of observing, analyzing, and changing things, processes, and systems. Dialectical materialism is the application of the dialectical process from a materialist standpoint, taking the material world as primary and fundamental. It argues that all matter progresses because of internal and external contradictions, which, once resolved, birth new contradictions, which drives the world's constant change.

- **Abstract:** An abstract concept indicates one of the countless aspects of a concrete thing. An abstract concept is something that cannot be observed in material reality directly but is based in material reality, such as thoughts and emotions. Abstract does not necessarily mean 'associated with ideas'; material concepts can be abstract, like the measurement of an object's height.

- **Concrete:** A concrete concept is one composed of many abstractions, each of which adds to its richness and depth of explanation. Concepts become more concrete through the accumulation of abstract aspects, bringing together its history, the context in which it exists and develops, the experiences of those embodying it, and much more. Concrete does not necessarily mean 'associated with matter;' ideas can be concrete concepts, such as the proletariat or the self.

Aspects of Contradiction

1. **The universality of contradiction**
   This has two aspects to it. The first aspect is that contradiction exists in all things, at all times, constantly influencing the development of all processes through the struggle of contradictory opposites. The second aspect is that contradiction exists universally in a thing or process from its beginning to its end, at which time a new contradiction begins.

   a. Example: for the second aspect, one example is the contradiction between life and death. Death struggles with life from the beginning of life to its end until ultimately death takes over life and a new contradiction, death being the main aspect, emerges as the process of decomposition begins.

2. **The particularity of contradiction**
   While contradiction exists in all things, how contradiction emerges in each thing or process is generally unique to that thing or process. This is what we mean when we say that contradictions have particular aspects.

   a. Example: In capitalism, the particular contradiction here is between the proletariat (workers) and the bourgeioisie (bosses). There is a contradiction between the public method of production, where workers come together and engage with each other socially to produce commodities (goods) for the marketplace, and the private means of ownership, where bosses own the goods produced by workers, despite not making it themselves.

3. **Principal and secondary contradictions**
   In one process, there can be and often are several contradictions which influence the direction of a thing or process. Regardless of how few or how many contradictions there are, there is always one principal aspect which has the most influence over the development of matter or a process. This does not mean that the other contradictions, the secondary ones, are unimportant. Additionally, the principal contradiction can change and a secondary contradiction can turn into the principal one depending on how something is developing.

   a. Example: In a country where there is still a lot chunk of the population that lives off of the land (the peasant class) this creates a bunch of secondary contradictions that are influential. In India, for instance, a semi-fuedal country (meaning peasantry still exists here), the principal contradiction is still between workers and bosses, but a secondary contradiction which develops struggle forward would be the contradiction between the peasantry and the bosses, or the peasantry and the landowners.

4. **Principal and secondary aspects of one contradiction**
   Similarly to the last point, within *one* contradiction, there is always an aspect that is principal and there is always an aspect that is secondary. Again which of these aspects is principal can change. When a contradiction has developed as far as it can, and a qualitative change occurs, this generally signals that the secondary aspect has become the principal one and that a new contradiction is beginning to occur.

   a. Example: Under capitalism, the principal aspect between the workers and the bosses are the bosses. This is because it is the bosses who exploit the workers, who hold political power, and who dominate the masses through the state which they control. After a revolution where the workers seize power, the workers will become the principal aspect and the bosses will be secondary. Under communism, this contradiction between workers and bosses will dissolve because there will be no classes struggling with one another, and new social contradictions will begin.

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