

The Karl Popper Debate Program and the International Debate Education Program

Karl Popper (1902–1994) was born in Austria and spent much of his life teaching and writing in England. A prolific writer, Popper believed in the existence of absolute truth but was suspicious of anyone who claimed to possess it. He argued that knowledge progresses in increments and that conclusions are provisional. He believed that theses are developed so that they may be discussed; that critical thinking is a collaborative process of dialogue and public discussion; and that knowledge progresses by conjecture and refutation—by the rigorous public testing of ideas and opinions. His writings include *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1934), *The Poverty of Historicism* (1944–45), and *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945).

Educational debate puts Popper's ideas into practice. Students who participate in educational debate learn to think critically and creatively about problems and issues in the political world and in their everyday lives. They learn skills necessary for active participation in deliberative democracy.

The Open Society Institute (OSI) and the Network of Soros Foundations established the OSI Network Debate Program in 1994 to encourage critical thinking, personal expression, and tolerance for different opinions. In 1999, the OSI Debate network established the International Debate Education Association (IDEA) in the Netherlands and, in 2001, in the United States. Since then, IDEA has helped introduce debate to thousands of students and teachers in high schools and universities in dozens of countries ranging from Albania to Zimbabwe. Participating students usually debate in their native languages, including minority languages in countries with significant minority populations.

IDEA's largest annual event is its International Youth Forum (IYF), where students and teachers from around the world gather for two weeks of seminars and debating on important contemporary topics. At the IYF, debate is presented as a method of teaching and critical thinking. The students and teachers who attend the IYF return home and work to establish or maintain debate programs in local schools and communities.

Students who graduate from schools where debate programs have been established are encouraged to continue their involvement by acting as judges or coaches. In each participating country, IDEA also helps to establish a nongovernmental organization to organize, promote, and sustain debate activities and also to coordinate instruction and competition.