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B-School Startups: Arabic Made Easy

A Carnegie Mellon grad launches Araboh.com, aimed at getting "entertaining, engaging, and practical" books in Arabic to children

By [Sommer Saadi](#)

Editor's Note: This story is part of Bloomberg Businessweek's occasional series on the world of startups. The series focuses on MBAs and undergraduate business students who developed their ideas or launched their businesses while still in school and the many ways their schools helped them get their new ventures off the ground. For a look at some business students trying to build their own businesses, check out this [slide show](#).

While growing up in Scotland, Jinanne Tabra struggled to learn Arabic. The textbooks used in her weekly lessons couldn't keep her attention. So years later, when Tabra's mother, a librarian at an elementary school in Qatar, complained over dinner one night about her students' lack of interest in Arabic books, Tabra wasn't surprised. She was inspired.

"I realized if it was hard to get kids to read Arabic in an Arab country, kids overseas didn't stand a chance," Tabra says. "There needed to be a go-to website where people around the world could find out about and order all the best materials for learning Arabic."

That night, Tabra bought the domain name [Araboh.com](#). "I chose the name Araboh because the 'oh' is a form of endearment in the Arab world," Tabra says. "As a child, my friends often called me Jinannoh, a child named Ahmed might be nicknamed Ahmedoh. I wanted the name to reflect that family-like closeness and that sense of community."

She spent the next six months using lessons from business classes and guidance from her professors to prepare for the live launch of the site in July 2008, a few months after she graduated from Carnegie Mellon's Qatar campus. By 2010, Tabra had tripled the revenue earned from book sales on the site.

In its current state, Araboh.com lists thousands of books, ranging from translations of popular American titles to original Arab stories to textbooks and worksheets, printed by more than 30 publishers around the world. Every book has been vetted and ranked by a member of the Araboh team on how entertaining, engaging, and practical it is in teaching Arabic. Visitors can also find step-by-step learning guides, advice on what materials to start with, and interactive activities to complement text lessons.

PITTSBURGH TO DOHA

The entrepreneurship bug bit Tabra while she was a business administration student at the Carnegie Mellon's Qatar campus in Doha. She chose CMU because she wanted to stay close to her family. The university, which provides the same curriculum and many of the same professors as the main campus in Pittsburgh, offered full-time, English-language undergraduate degree programs in business and computer science. "I didn't feel like I lost anything from the Pittsburgh experience," Tabra says. "The cross-campus connection is tight."

She enrolled in Dr. George White's Intro to Entrepreneurship and New Venture Creation classes her senior year and says White has become an ongoing mentor for her and the company. "He said people shouldn't start a business for the sake of starting a business, but to do things that make meaning," Tabra says. "We do that at Araboh."

White, not surprisingly, agrees. "(Jinanne) is setting a good example for the right reasons to go into business," White says. "In my class, I tried to focus the lessons on why someone should start a business. The motive is not always about making money. I used examples that involved people who stumbled upon fortunes only because they wanted to change the world. I think Jinanne really took that lesson to heart."

Another important class for Tabra was a course offered sophomore year, Business Communication, where she learned how to manage and talk with staff effectively. She says every lesson learned in class has come into practice while working with her 13 employees.

HARD-TO-FIND TITLES

Araboh.com is a distribution site not unlike Amazon, except the team is a lot more involved with the inventory. "We're not just a middleman," Tabra says. She and her team work with publishers to ensure the quality of the product. A lot of the publishers they work with have the best materials for teaching Arabic but not the savviest technology or marketing techniques. "When we started out three years ago, many of our publishers had to call and fax because they didn't even have e-mail,"

she says.

But because the publishers' products were top-notch and underdistributed, Tabra knew stocking some of the hard-to-find titles would give her site a competitive edge.

Inventory is kept in a warehouse in Qatar, but the headquarters is now in Boston. Deliveries have been made to more than 50 countries around the world. Although they sell to a lot of individuals interested in the language, more than three-quarters of revenue comes from institutions around the world looking to augment their libraries and classrooms with Arabic educational materials.

Aside from her first year out of school, when Tabra worked as a staff member at Carnegie Mellon, she has been able to focus solely on her duties as chief executive and managing director. Now, with the help of her employees, she's maintaining the growing business and working toward a master's degree in international education policy at Harvard University.

Tabra says: "This degree, like my business degree, will only make me more prepared to lead this company."

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