

On Saturday 26 August, The Jordan Ministry of Education opened an eleven day Teacher Training Workshop for twenty eighth grade teachers of Arabic for a pilot project in discussion based education. Called MaHakkaat after the stone that tests the quality of gold, these discussion methods are similar to Abbasid methods of education that contributed to the intellectual excellence and creativity of the Arab/Islamic Golden Age.

Dr. Taysir al Nahar opened the Workshop at the Queen Rania Center. The pilot project will take place in the Microsoft IT facilities of the QRC. Demonstrating the importance of this revival of Abbasid education methods, the opening was attended by: the Minister of Education, Dr. Khalid Touqan; the ex-Prime Minister and now President of Petra University, Dr. Adnan Badran; the former Minister and Educator, Senator Leila Sharaf; the former Minister, Senator Akel Biltaji, and the officials of the Curriculum Department of the Jordan Ministry of Education.

MaHakkaat uses brief passages from great Arabic writers, Greek-Roman Classics, long in Arabic, and Arabic folk tales to stimulate the serious discussion of no-trivial ideas derived from them. Students, arranged in a circle to promote participation and cooperation by all, hear read and follow the brief text silently in their books, used only in the classroom. Then the students select the most interesting or challenging ideas from the text to form questions about. Asking the right questions is vital. Students' answers are not right or wrong but are opinions to be supported or self-rejected by logical reasoning.

These open-ended discussions, even for only one hour every two weeks, help students' confidence in their own thinking, to cooperate in searching for more understanding and promote life-long self learning skills. MaHakkaat discussions also help students to get more out of what they read and to write more clearly in all subjects.

Touchstones, the English word for MaHakkaat (www.touchstones.org), discussion education methods are used by over 600,000 students world wide in classes from early elementary through secondary. Previously, such Abbasid empowering education methods were used only for a tiny elite in colleges. But the need for earlier and narrower specialization and the demand for many more knowledge workers has made it essential to begin discussion methods of education before even secondary level. Science and technology workers especially need to have discussion education before they specialize in order to stimulate original hypotheses and creative experiments.

If the pilot project in 2006-7 proves its worth, MaHakkaat will develop two additional books of Arabic texts for grades seven through ten. During this year, the Curriculum Department and the teachers participating in this pilot project will develop a Teachers' Manual in Arabic for the particular needs of teachers in Jordan and the Arab world. Jordan agreed to begin this revival of Abbasid discussion based education because it fits so well into the Education Reform for Knowledge Economy already underway. Jordan will take the initiative to spread these methods to other Arabic nations as part of its educational leadership role in the Arab world.

For more information, please contact: