

# Flexible Learning Spaces and the Majlis

By Andrea Cooney

## The Majlis

At Sheikh Zayed Private Academy Library, the Majlis – or ‘reading tent’ – provides students with a place for sitting, reading, researching, story-telling and discussion. Cushions and carpets line the floors of the Majlis, providing a comfortable and inviting space for students to gather regularly throughout the day, enhancing the ‘library experience’ by providing a space that is enticing, inviting and comfortable.

The Majlis is at the heart of Arab culture; traditionally a large, heavy goat-hair tent, it is where people sit at the same level to participate in discussions, decision-making, to entertain, to ask questions, and tell stories. Although reading is not a traditional practice in the Majlis, it is one that is certainly encouraged at the Academy as we aim to increase our literacy rates which, in the United Arab Emirates, are still generally below 90%.

We also aim to forge links between traditional practices and future directions, incorporating cultural norms with visions for the future, from leaders of the Emirates such as Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan. Sheikh Zayed, a visionary ruler who was a driving force in the creation of the United Arab Emirates, also held strong views regarding the value of the written word:

“The book is a symbol of learning, civilisation, culture, knowledge and the arts. Nations are appraised not only by their tangible fortunes, but primarily by their originality and the value of their civilization, the basis of which is the book” (Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan).

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The word Majlis comes from the verb ‘to sit’ and is an **Arabic** term meaning ‘a place of sitting’. This time-honored practice was traditionally an opportunity for open discussion and decision-making which evolved into an important, although informal, part of the United Arab Emirates governing system. The ‘Majlis’ system of open discussion between the rulers of the emirates is still a valued practice in which participants may raise a wide range of topics, both of personal interest and of broader concern.

Emiratis continue to hold ‘open’ Majlis along with other members of Islamic countries who hold both formal and informal assemblies with those who have linguistic

or cultural connections. In the smaller emirates, it is still possible for traditionally-minded tribesmen to come to the Majlis; even though they may wait months for the opportunity to discuss issues with their ruler directly, they choose this form of pursuing their requests or complaints rather than address their needs through governmental procedures. So while the Majlis is, in fact, the customary meeting place for tribal

leaders and their people, it has become a central icon for local gatherings throughout the United Arab Emirates.

The Majlis is our cultural contribution to the Academy library, as we aim to blend the traditional with our mission:

The Library Media Centre [LMC] strives to be the intellectual and cultural centre of Sheikh Zayed Private Academy, providing a wealth of literature, knowledge, and information. The Library Media Centre presents a welcoming and nurturing environment to support students and staff by offering all patrons the opportunity to develop a love of literature, the ability to be information-literate through user-friendly access to quality resources, and instruction in a variety of formats.

The Library Media Centre provides social contact for all to share a love of both multiethnic and multimedia materials. Students and staff are encouraged to engage in becoming lifelong learners developing positive attitudes toward libraries and information sources.

## Learning and teaching

We are aware that in the United Arab Emirates written literature was never a major part of the cultural experience; rather, oral traditions were the norm and remain popular, particularly storytelling and poetry, with poetry readings and competitions held regularly. Students at the Academy, which is a private educational institution, are instructed in English while also receiving Arabic and Islamic instruction. Although English is the language of instruction, the students are mainly from local Arabic families who have chosen to have their children instructed in English. This is influenced by the fact that English is the language of commerce and business and that, generally, there is an increasing reliance on English within the Emirates with proposed changes throughout the national educational system to deliver further subjects in English.

At Sheikh Zayed Private Academy Library we are able to provide our teachers and students with alternative spaces for teaching and learning created by the majlis, various sofa settings, floor areas with mats and cushions, various groupings of tables and individual carrels. As we continue to develop and reinvent our library media centre for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have an opportunity to incorporate the philosophies of Barbara Prashnig (2000) on individual learning styles.

Prashnig has pioneered the concept of learning spaces in schools, businesses and organisations around the world and advocates a range of physical learning spaces that provide for varying learners' styles. Spaces that enhance learning experiences are considered of major importance in allowing for differentiating in teaching and learning. The LMC is in the fortunate position of being able to provide both formal and informal learning and study areas, bright and dimly lit areas, areas that cater for differing levels of noise and movement and mobility. Social preferences are also considered, with students able to work alone, in pairs, with peers, or in a team with laptop wireless internet access and stand-alone computer access.



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## Conclusion

We are very aware of the need to provide a welcoming and nurturing environment to support students and staff providing not only the traditional services expected from the LMC but also to provide for the physical needs of students by creating enticing and comfortable learning areas catering for individual learning styles.

The need for school libraries to remain relevant and purposeful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a challenge that teacher-librarians are very aware of as we continue to create possibilities to build and extend school libraries' capacity to support student learning now and in the future. School libraries must be flexible learning centres, providing for the range of learning needs and styles within schools by creating enticing and meaningful spaces supporting students' individual learning needs.

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