Building a Habitat for the Digital Humanities

Adding Digital Project Support to the Library Services

Shawn Averkamp, Jason Battles, Thomas Wilson
University of Alabama
LITA National Forum, October 1, 2011

Recent History at UAL

○ *added & equipped spaces for general use...*

Gorgas Learning Commons

Recent History at UAL

○ *added & equipped spaces for general use...*

Small Group Conferencing

Recent History at UAL
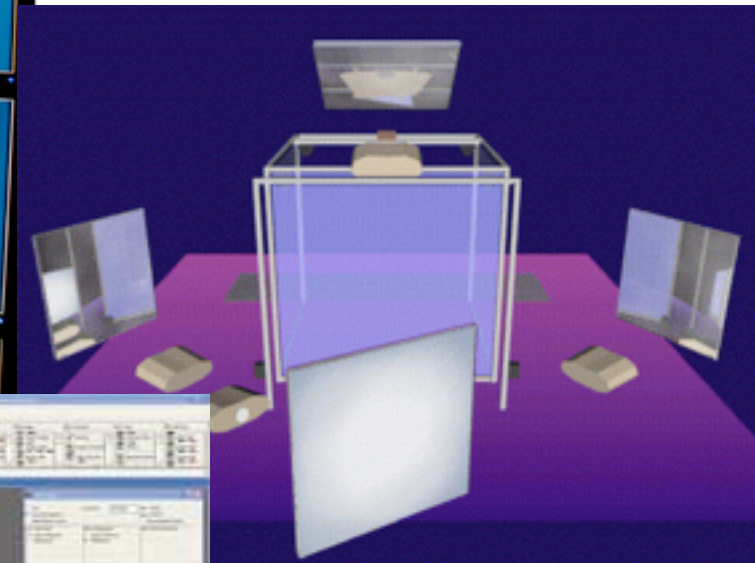
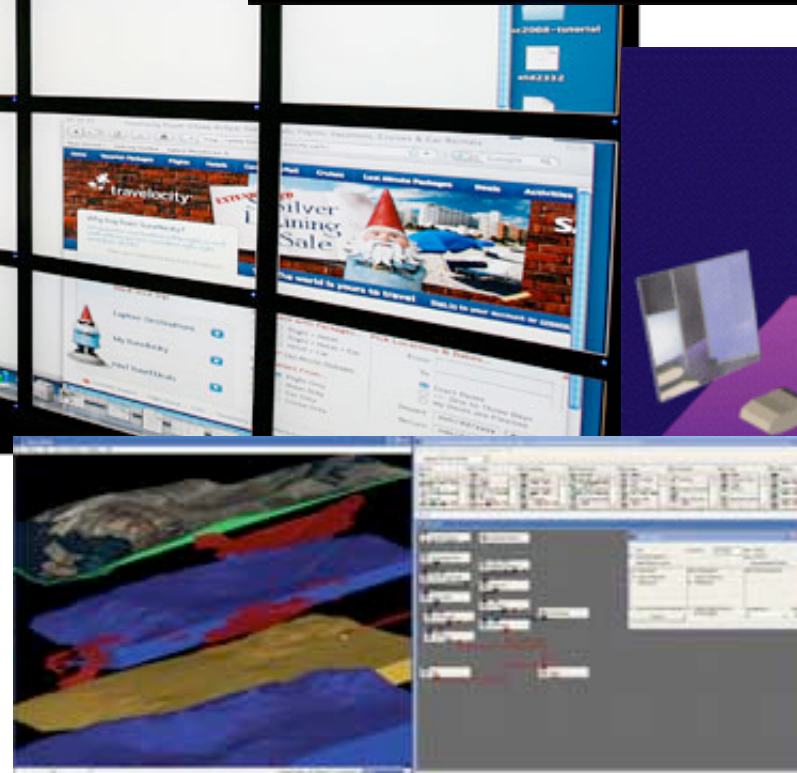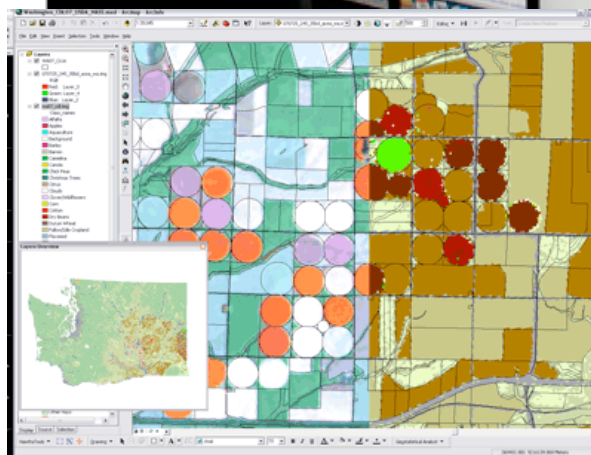○ *added & equipped spaces for general use...*

Instructional & Lab Space

A Space Specifically for

- *… & graduate students*
- *needed …*
  - *technology*
  - *flexible layout*
  - *defined purpose*
  - *users*

Dream Big

Then Focus

- *Gorgas = humanities & social sciences*

- *mix of technologies: proven & sandbox*

- *flexible & enhance-able*

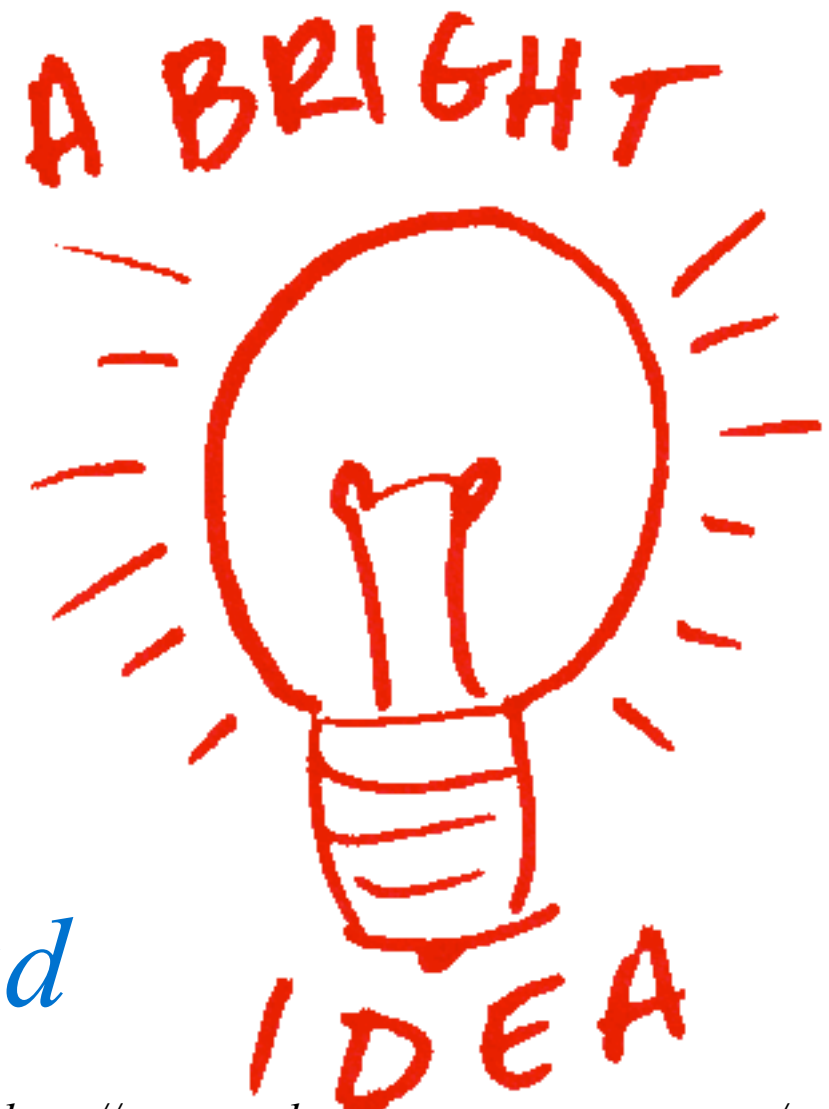# *Need Conversation*

- *all about process, not technology*
- *brown bag lunch discussions*

Learned...

○ *time was right*

○ *interest was high*

○ *needs not being met*

○ *desire to experiment*

○ *skill sets needed, we had*

http://www.realestatecontentsystem.com/
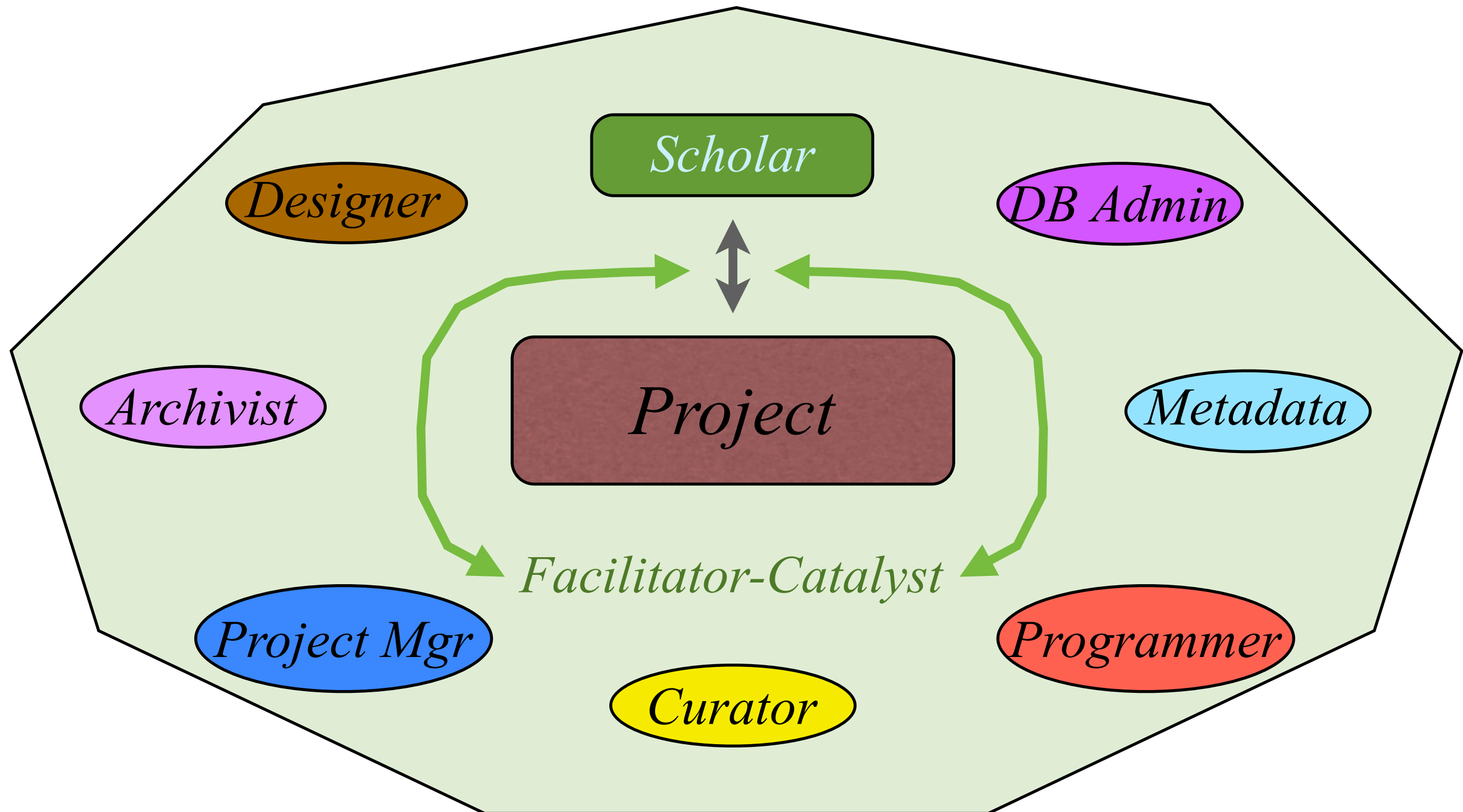
And best of all...

... we have enthusiasts and skeptics!

... we have old hands and newbies!

... we have tenured and tenure-track faculty!

Working Model
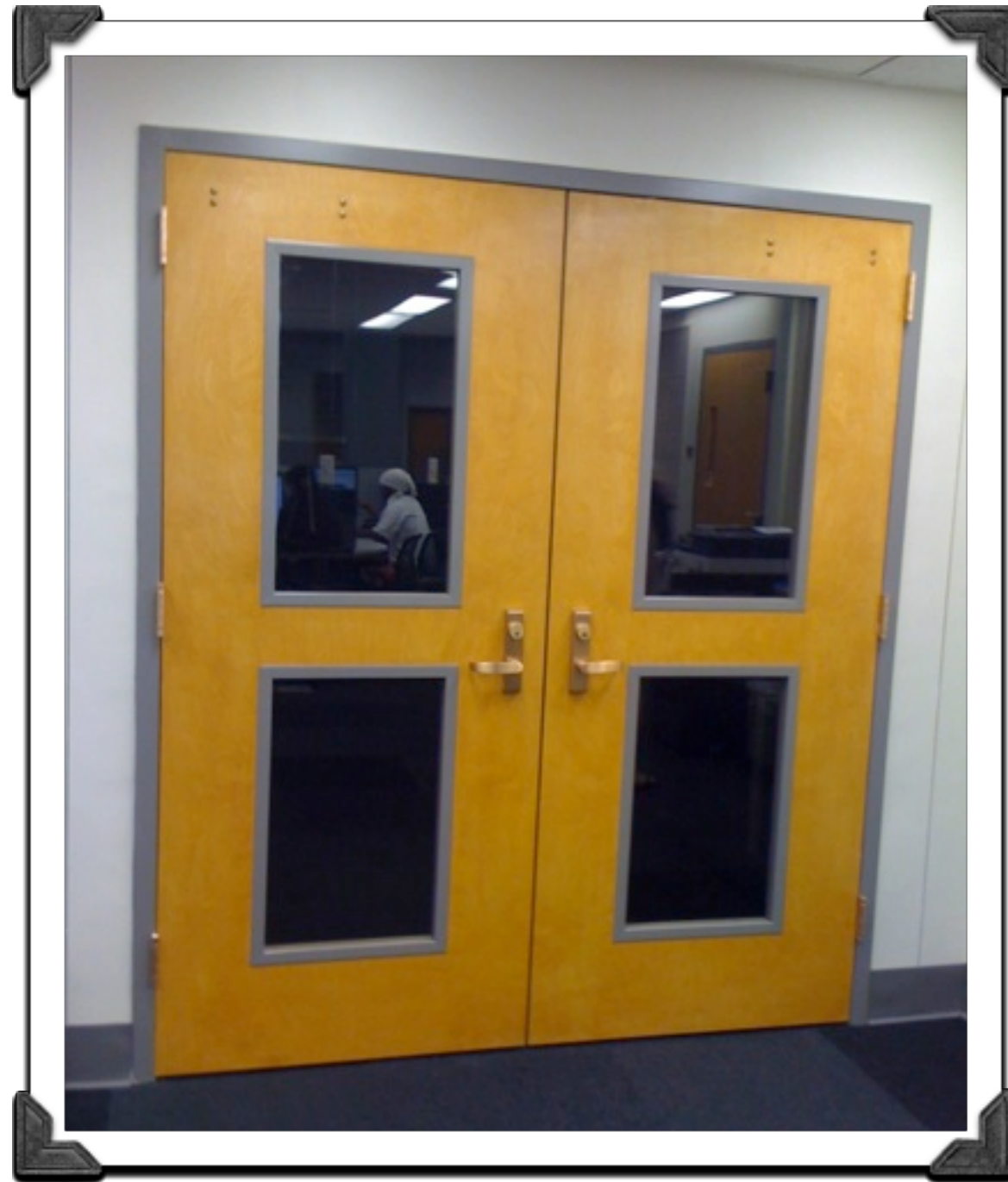
And so it happened...

Background

Who we are, what we do

Jason [web]

Director of the Office of Library Technology

Shawn [data]

Metadata Librarian

Shared Expertise and Experience

Librarian-Scholar Consultations

- Leveraging librarians' technology skills

- What we **expected**

- How we started

- Understanding faculty needs

The Shakespeare Scholar

Project

Creating a website for Shakespeare adaptations encoded in TEI

Project Needs

Advice on choosing and administering a CMS, getting started with XML and TEI; server space

Challenges

Unsure if we could offer server space or technical support for installing a CMS

The Community Engagement Scholar

Project

Creating a website to showcase high school student photography of the post-tornado experience

Project Needs

Advice on choosing a CMS, capturing and organizing image and geo metadata, designing a site with robust search/browse features; server space

Challenges

Unsure if we could offer server space for website or repository space for digital image content

The Military Historian

Project

Creating a database for revolutionary war muster roll data.

Project Needs

Advice on creating a data model, building a database, populating the database with transcribed data from ~400 Word documents

Challenges

Helping him feel comfortable with outside assistance; connecting him with project assistance

The Antiquities Scholar

Project

Creating an online bibliography of Late Antiquity Middle Eastern manuscripts and an authority file of authors

Project Needs

Advice on how to store authority data, finding/creating a simple interface for data entry

Challenges

Recommending any specific solutions to match his team's limited tech skills

Lessons Learned

We need *policies!*

- Meeting expectations
- Not overwhelming librarians

Where *can I put this stuff?*

- Repository space needs
- Sandbox environments

Finding faculty *assistance* *for project tasks*

- Understanding scope
- Collaborations within the community
- Locating the right person to ask (matchmaking)

Follow-up Interviews

What we hoped to learn

What we asked

What they said and what we're doing about it

- Community

- Workshops

- Sharing our processes, approaches, and failures

Getting feedback

How well did we address your project needs? Did we raise any **new questions** for you?

Did we use too much jargon?

Did you *leave with a better idea* of how to proceed with your project?

What else would you like the ADHC to offer?

Librarian expertise

Provide scholars with workshops and one-on-one training on basic tech skills

- XML Basics

- XML Schema and XSLT

- Setting up a LAMP/MAMP/WAMP environment

"I'd love to *bounce my project ideas* off of other scholars"

"Could we have more **community-based** learning sessions?"

"I'd like to see what others involved in the Center are working on"

"I want to ***connect*** with scholars who have the tech experience that I don't"

Librarians as community builders

- Create online *community profiles* for scholars and librarians to share their projects and experience

- Start an **online forum** where scholars can ask questions of each other

- Invite active ADHC members to write for a collaborative blog

- Hold ***brown bag discussions*** on special topics in DH

Outreach!

"I liked hearing you talk about projects similar to mine"

"I felt validated hearing that you've run into the same problems I did"

"You helped me put my own project in perspective"

Path to Production

"a workflow that move's one's code in predictable ways from areas specifically carved out for mess-making, idiosyncrasy, and flux to those that have been progressively tamed -- areas engineered for greater fixity and stability."

Nowviskie, Bethany, "A Skunk in the Library," Bethany Nowviskie, June 28, 2011, http://nowviskie.org/2011/a-skunk-in-the-library/

Librarians as models of good practice

- Share with scholars what we do *on the job*

- Show scholars what goes into bringing an idea from *development* to *test* to *production*

Librarians as models of "good enough" practice

There is an impulse in libraries to

"[lay] a smooth professional veneer over increasingly decrepit and under-funded infrastructure—effectively of hiding the **messy innards** of the library from your faculty"

Nowviskie, Bethany, "A Skunk in the Library," Bethany Nowviskie, June 28, 2011, http://nowviskie.org/2011/a-skunk-in-the-library/

Librarians as models of "good enough" practice

- Make a conscious effort to incorporate examples from our own work (**successes** and **failures**) in workshops, discussions, and consultations

- Focus on creating an atmosphere where scholars feel **comfortable** asking "stupid" questions

"I don't know what you do"

"I don't want to bother you"

"I don't know who to ask"

"I don't know **what help** I'm allowed to ask for"

"I don't want to waste your time"

Librarians as intellectual equals

"...organizational service mentality prevents librarians and library staff from engaging with faculty as true intellectual partners—from developing the kind of relationships that foster frankness and fellow-feeling..."

"What if part of our obligation...were to assert our own intellectual and research agendas?"

Nowviskie, Bethany, "A Skunk in the Library," Bethany Nowviskie, June 28, 2011, http://nowviskie.org/2011/a-skunk-in-the-library/

Meeting scholars where they are

- Use terminology and practices that scholars understand, like "office hours"

- Bring our own projects and ideas to the table

- Be open to *collaborating* on projects rather than just *supporting* them

Conclusion

- Research will continue changing

- Creating a community of researchers
  - faculty **AND** librarians
  - sharing benefits

- A digital humanities habitat can be built anywhere

Alabama Digital Humanities Center

Questions?

smaverkamp@ua.edu

jjbattles@ua.edu