



The Pedotopia Project: A Transdisciplinary Experiment in Soil Education

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In the absence of every-day interactions with the land, a hands-on, comprehensive soil education across disciplines and ages is necessary. Soil education is usually integrated into earth science and geography curricula and only rarely into social science, arts and humanities programs. Furthermore, an emphasis on measurement and modeling in conventional classroom science often neglects aesthetic, moral and other non-quantifiable values, precluding a broader cultural context in which soil education could take place.

The arts play a vital role in communicating environmental issues to the greater public and represent a dynamic approach to help students discover soil complexity in new and unexpected ways. Artistic methods have recently been introduced as pedagogical tools in soil awareness-raising programs for children and youth. Painting with soil has become an interesting new approach to soil education from Kindergarten to University levels (SZLEZAK 2008). And a growing amount of literature describes artists who have undertaken different soil issues, suggesting that such artistic focus may improve wider understanding and appreciation of soil conservation issues (FELLER et al 2010, TOLAND & WESSOLEK 2010, WAGNER 2002).

How can art contribute to soil science, policy and education – both with the aim of generating greater public understanding, but also by honing creative methods to confront problems such as contamination, erosion, and urban sprawl? What artistic approaches exist to protect and restore soils as well as our relationship to the land? And how can these approaches support current soil education goals? These questions were addressed in the transdisciplinary soil seminar, “Pedotopia – Re-sourcing Urban Soils” from September 2010 to September 2011 in Berlin. A cooperation between the Technical University of Berlin’s Department of Soil Protection and the Berlin University of Arts’ Institute for Art in Context, the project served as a teaching experiment as well as a platform for the production of new soil-oriented artworks. An exhibition of the resulting works as well as a symposium on the cultural values of soil conservation was held at the annual meeting of the German Soil Science Society (DBG) in 2011 in Berlin. In the following paper we will present the Pedotopia project as a case study in transdisciplinary soil education. We will highlight main points of the curriculum, present the results of the project and address challenges and future considerations of transdisciplinary soil education.

SOURCES

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