



Soil Storytelling: Developing a Seminar to Fuse Scientific Foundations with Artistic Expression

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Soils hold a unique position at the nexus of the major global issues we face – socioeconomic injustices, health/nutrition and the rise in chronic disease, and environmental degradation/climate change. They serve as the base of our global economy; the source of food, of life; and are a dominant player in the provision of ecosystem services, upon which we all depend. As the millennial generation comes of age, inheriting the challenge of feeding nine billion on fewer acres with less impact amidst an uncertain climate, they often look upward to other planets or towards innovative technologies to dig us out, when a myriad of solutions lie right beneath their feet, unbeknownst to them.

Millennials tend to be largely purpose-driven, adept at organizing and collaborating, and aware of their agency in facilitating change, but there is currently a vast disconnect between the scientific community and the general populace and an even larger disconnect between ourselves and the land. Educating millennials about the value and importance of soil provides a unique opportunity to empower and engage young minds in developing real, sustainable solutions. By illuminating the hidden world underfoot – its beauty, mystery and vibrancy – we can awaken a sense of awe and wonder, reconnect people to the natural world, and inspire a generation of explorers focused on the final frontier right here on Earth.

Taking a page out of the industry playbook, wherein carefully crafted messaging campaigns are employed to tell clear, concise stories that “sell” to the masses and directly influence consumer habits; the scientific community can invoke the timeless art of storytelling to communicate soil science in an accessible way that evokes an emotional response, influences public opinion and inspires social change. While a plethora of quality, soil-related resources can be found on the web, there exists no centralized multimedia hub that is palatable to the masses and targeted at millennials; fusing scientific foundations with artistic expression to simultaneously educate and entertain.

As such, we have created a project-based seminar that 1) educates graduate students in scientific communication and the use of storytelling to develop positive, solutions based messaging that leads with clearly communicated, broader impacts and 2) facilitates the development of original media content to be hosted on an interactive website, highlighting the various ways that soil is connected to our everyday lives, overall health, and well-being. Tapping into the resources available in a university setting, we recruited students from across the sciences, arts and humanities and cross-collaborated to develop deliverable products – a website (in development), educational resources, original media content (infographics, short videos, short stories), as well as a well-defined curriculum that can easily be replicated at other universities or institutions.