



The green, green sands of home: immersive experiences for raising soil awareness

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With one third of the world's fertile topsoil lost and most of the rest in a poor condition, there is no doubt that soils need more attention in society in general and in education in particular. Nevertheless, connecting people to soils in a current context of urbanisation and digitalisation is not straightforward. We think that one of the hurdles in improving this soil connectivity is getting rid of the 'big brown blob': soils are often depicted as a dumbed-down, generic, boring brown structures even in educational graphics or pamphlets. Obviously, it's difficult to get people excited about that.

Only a very limited amount of people, often only in higher education, gets to experience what soils are actually like. In collaboration with educational experts, artists and landscape and heritage experts, we started a series of immersive educational and art projects. The concept was to spike people's interest by showing them the beauty and variability of soils in landscapes, muse on their peculiarities and reflect on how the world above is influenced by what is hidden beneath. Soil monoliths, as life-like representations of actual landscapes, were combined to art installations indoors as well as in the field and coupled to the work of graphical and word artists, and how they perceive the soil. We also created digital below-ground 'tours' of how soils manifest themselves in the stories of our landscapes. In particular, our installations featuring Podzols and greensands were very popular, as they provide a quite dramatic and visually appealing spectacle that most people would not expect to find in soils.

By immersing people into a world they usually have no access to, our goal was to evoke intrinsic interest and wonder by including them in the educational process, i.e. giving them the opportunity to do their own discoveries rather than talking to them about something they would have very little intrinsic affection to. In this contribution, we will highlight the main techniques we used and lessons we learned from the persons that contributed to our work.