2 Educating the Democratic Citizen

Frederick Jackson Turner, History Education, and the University Extension Movement

Marc A. VanOverbeke

I

Frederick Jackson Turner, one of the most famous historians at the turn of the 20th century, argued that the American frontier and the continued availability of free land had driven the formation of a distinctive national identity. “The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization,” he said at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and its effect has been felt most “in the promotion of democracy.” Turner concluded his address ominously by arguing that “the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history” (Turner, 1893/1994b, pp. 33, 53, 60). With the closing of the frontier, the development of large corporations and factories, the impressive growth of cities, and the striking stratification of social classes, the United States was in the midst of a profound transformation at the turn of the 20th century. Along with other scholars and reformers, Turner wondered how Americans would cope with such sweeping changes. What would stand in for the frontier and help Americans navigate the transition to a new century, Turner asked; and for much of his career he had been considering ways to foster democracy and an American identity in a country no longer teeming with free land. As a young history professor at the University of Wisconsin, Turner looked to mass education and the study of history as a way to deal with the challenges of a new century.

Turner believed that if Wisconsin’s citizens understood the past and the role that their forebears had played in history they would have a greater comprehension of the present and of America, be able to use that knowledge to think critically about issues confronting society, and, thereby, play influential roles in maintaining democracy. To succeed in making history and education the foundation on which democratic citizenship existed, Turner championed a broadened focus for the discipline of history that included the common people that historians traditionally had neglected in favor of presidents, monarchs, and great inventors. He wanted Wisconsin’s citizens to see themselves in the past and to gain strength from that past.

Expanding the scope of history, however, was not enough. Turner had to take this new conception of history directly to the people, and he turned to the university’s extension program as part of the answer. Extension had the power, in Turner’s view, to strengthen citizenship by taking rigorous, intellectually demanding courses—with the discipline of history in a commanding role—out of the university and into the communities and towns where people lived. His goal was to make knowledge available to all citizens so that they would have the information they needed to ensure that the country developed in ways that were harmonious, democratic, and just. In the process, Turner raised important questions about education that are at the heart of modern notions of social justice—who has access to it and can take advantage of that access; what is the connection between education and social action; and who determines what knowledge is most important?
To help Americans adapt to the sweeping events of the last decades of the 19th century, Turner looked to the university, and he was in the forefront of efforts that pushed the University of Wisconsin toward addressing the needs of the state’s citizens. A native of Wisconsin, he earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees at the state university in Madison and his doctorate from Johns Hopkins University in 1889, after which he returned to the University of Wisconsin as a professor of history. At Wisconsin, where he was an influential historian and a pivotal figure on campus, he joined other faculty in building one of the first extension or adult education programs in the country in 1891. What Turner and his colleagues developed was a fairly complex program of courses and credits that took knowledge to the state’s citizens. Professors traveled throughout Wisconsin to offer classes that usually consisted of six lectures over a period of six weeks. Optional discussions followed each lecture and provided opportunities for in-depth consideration of relevant issues. Students electing to attend the lectures and discussions, finish weekly reading assignments, and complete an examination earned credit toward class work at the University of Wisconsin. In the program’s initial year, Turner and his peers taught 47 courses in 34 cities and towns. They reached over 8,000 students, half of whom remained for the discussions that followed the lectures. They maintained this energetic pace over the next few years, and the number of courses given remained more or less the same. In building such a program, Wisconsin’s professors were not unique, and other universities throughout the country developed similar programs in the last decade of the 19th century (Billington, 1973; Chamberlin, 1893; Curti & Carstensen, 1949a, b; Kett, 1994; Rudolph, 1968; Turner, 1893b).

These programs embraced a very precise notion of education. Thomas Chamberlin, Wisconsin’s president, made the focus of extension clear when he inaugurated “University Extension of the English type” at Wisconsin. He was referring to an extension program that Cambridge University in England developed in 1873 that gave students “a thorough grasp of principles, and a real mental training” in courses “covering a range of subjects sufficiently wide to give a broad and liberal higher education” (Roberts, 1891, p. 123). As a result, Wisconsin’s extension students took courses in the arts, humanities, and sciences, and on such varied topics as bacteriology and political economics, English literature and plant physiology, landscape geology and Scandinavian literature. Some of them enrolled in Turner’s courses on North American colonization, American politics, American development, and the West and Revolution.

By offering these types of courses, the extension program built on, but was different from, the university’s other outreach programs, including the farmers’ institutes that had existed since 1885. These institutes focused on the utilitarian or practical side of life by training farmers in new agricultural techniques. The goal of the extension program, by contrast, was not a few lectures that focused on developing practical skills or appealing to mass interests, but a comprehensive program of study that was demanding and rigorous in scope. Extension courses exposed students to the liberal arts and sciences, and opened up to them the results of professorial research and expertise. At the turn of the 20th century, university professors were transforming academic disciplines in line with scientific principles of investigation and analysis, and Turner believed that the knowledge gained from such research had the power to improve people’s lives and instill in them a sense of beauty and culture. The university professor, he argued, needed to share this valuable knowledge by being “the apostle of the higher culture to the community in which he is placed,” and he approved of that “social impulse which has led university men to bring the fruits of their study home to the people” (Turner, 1891/1994a, p. 29).
In other words, extension lecturers would leave the ivied halls of the university, but their lecture notes would come with them (Brubacher & Rudy, 1968; Chamberlin, 1893; Curti & Carstensen, 1949a, b; Lucas, 1994; Rudolph, 1968; Thelin, 2004; Turner, 1890/1938, 1893b; Veysey, 1965; Wisconsin Teachers’ Association, 1891).

Embracing a faith common to many reformers of the era that education would enhance democratic citizenship, Turner threw himself into establishing an academically rich extension program. He expected a lot from his extension students, many of whom probably had only a limited education, and his courses demanded that they think critically about history and consider evidence before drawing conclusions. In his course on the colonization of North America, for example, he asked his students to “trace the effects of Spanish discovery and colonization upon the English ideas of America in the sixteenth century.” When discussing whether the “Norse voyages to America influenced Columbus,” Turner encouraged his students to weigh the arguments for and against such an influence. Turning to slavery in the United States, he delved into the factors giving rise to slavery and debated with his students “the justice of excluding slavery from the territories” (Turner, n.d. [1892], 1893a, 1895).

True to his belief that extension courses should be demanding, Turner did not feed his students an easily digested menu of historical offerings. He refused to undermine the discipline of history by focusing solely on entertaining stories or by ignoring essential details and complexities for the sake of easy comprehension. He was not opposed to the compelling narrative or to making history interesting to his audiences, and he worked to include absorbing stories and anecdotes in his lectures, but he insisted that historical understanding be thorough in order to be valid. “An interesting style, even a picturesque manner of presentation, is not to be condemned,” he reasoned, “provided that truthfulness of substance rather than vivacity of style be the end sought” (Turner, 1891/1994a, p. 12). His lectures did not gloss over subtleties or attempt to distort the truth, as he saw it, merely for the sake of a gripping narrative. Instead, he demanded the attention and intellectual concentration of those attending his extension lectures. Rather than sacrificing truth to a compelling narrative, he rejected a popular lecture style of simplified arguments and easy analyses. He would not democratize education simply by making it popular (Schafer, 1938).

While establishing a program that took knowledge directly to the masses, Turner championed a broader, more democratic version of knowledge, at least in his field of history. He argued for an expansive study of the past that moved beyond a traditional view that explored only the great heroes or that focused solely on religious struggles and the rise of political institutions. While historical research, he maintained, has had its focus on “intrigues of court, knightly valor, palaces and pyramids”—the “brilliant annals of the few,” in other words—history had other tales to tell: “the degraded tillers of the soil, toiling that others might dream, the slavery that rendered possible the ‘glory that was Greece,’” for example. History, he claimed, was “the biography of society in all its departments,” and this biography needed to include “the great mass of the people” and not just the heroes or statesmen. Such a focus on the great masses reflected Turner’s belief that average people had influenced the development of nations. The economic growth and social conditions of common people, the ownership of property, and the distribution of wealth, he asserted, had “been the secret of the nation’s rise or fall.” The tales of common laborers struggling to build nations and civilizations were the real stories for historians, “by the side of which much that has passed as history is the merest frippery,” he thundered (Turner, 1891/1994a, pp. 15, 18).

When Turner talked about the biography of society, however, he was not ignoring the role of statesmen and rulers. Popes, kings, and presidents figured prominently in
Turner’s courses. Columbus and Magellan made appearances, as did Washington and Jefferson. Martin Luther and the Reformation were present, as was George III. These were pivotal figures in the past. Ignoring them would have been as problematic as overlooking the common people. Yet, Turner did not concentrate on them to the exclusion of the average citizens. In his extension lectures, he addressed the role of the “tillers of the soil,” the fur traders who explored Wisconsin, and the slaves in the southern regions of the country. His lectures included discussions of Indian civilizations and the architecture of the Pueblo cliff dwellings, the intertribal trade among Indians, and their interactions with early European settlers. When lecturing on the colonization of New England, Turner focused on the social distinctions of the original, “almost purely English” settlers. He discussed their schools and economic life and provided vignettes from various books, including official Massachusetts records, to highlight life in an early New England community. Additionally, as part of his lecture on westward expansion and settlement, Turner considered the importance of the Scotch-Irish frontiersmen to expansion (Turner, n.d. [1892], 1893a, 1895).

He wanted Wisconsin’s citizens to see themselves in the extension courses he offered and in the past he opened up to them. Americans needed such knowledge, he contended, if they were to be strong, effective citizens. “Perhaps [history’s] most practical utility to us, as public school teachers,” he said at a summer lecture for teachers in 1890, “is its service in fostering good citizenship.” For Turner, there was a direct connection between history education and citizenship, and he shared this view with other reformers then seeking to restructure education to include more American history courses. Historical knowledge and appreciation, he argued, would build a strong nation comprised of democratic citizens working to further strengthen the nation. But, Turner insisted, only by understanding the role of common people in history would Americans come to a full understanding of the past and, as he was linking it, the present. “The present,” he said, “is simply the developing past, the past the undeveloped present” (Turner, 1891/1994a, pp. 19, 28).

Most Americans would never become statesmen or influential captains of industry. Still, as they always had, these citizens would help to define the character and identity of the nation. If they understood the past and the deeply crucial roles they had played, Turner declared, they would understand the fundamental role they needed to play in the present and, by implication, in the future. Historical knowledge, he professed, enables “us to realize the richness of our inheritance, the possibility of our lives, the grandeur of the present.” It gives people “new thoughts and feelings, new aspirations and energies.” These “thoughts and feelings,” he said, then “flow into deeds,” and such actions “create good politics” and improve society. Average Americans might not individually have the influence of presidents and kings, but collectively as an educated citizenry, they would define a country and its path toward democracy and justice (Curti, 1961; Reese, 1995; Reuben, 2005; Turner, 1891/1994a, pp. 23, 29).

For Turner, then, history had value, in part, because it furthered citizenship by demanding that people wade through complex historical events and consider their connection to the past and to the present. Connected with extension education, he claimed, such historical knowledge would be revolutionary. In a metaphor that likely resonated in the farming communities of Wisconsin, he asserted that university extension would be a means “for carrying irrigating streams of education into the arid regions of the State” (Turner, 1893b, p. 315). Extension gave him the chance to take history directly to the parched inhabitants of the state, and he reached his loftiest heights when he proclaimed that such a program would “work a real revolution in our towns and villages as well as in
our great cities.” Extension and history had the power to become revolutionary vehicles in the promotion of a modern democracy (Turner, 1891/1994a, p. 29).

Turner climbed the rhetorical heights of educational revolution to support the place of extension and history at a public university, but bringing about this revolution demanded more than grand phrases. He lectured exhaustively in an effort to make extension a statewide institution capable of taking an expanded conception of history to the people and awakening in them new ideas about their role in American society. Even with the energetic support of other extension lecturers and successive university presidents, however, the movement never materialized as Turner envisioned it would. The program began auspiciously with large audiences, but by the mid-1890s the courses were failing to consistently attract sizable audiences or to draw citizens from a variety of social classes and backgrounds. Extension was not a movement intended solely or even principally for the affluent. The important prerequisite to participation in extension work was not wealth or even prior preparation, but an interest in studying and learning. Even without the requirement of academic training, however, the movement failed to reach throughout the state and interest all of Wisconsin’s residents. Turner found some mix of citizens in his lectures, with business and professional men, college students, and local teachers predominating, but most of the students were women and professionals.

As a result, the movement existed mainly as a series of lectures for a rather limited subsection of the common people that Turner desired to reach. He believed that average citizens, cognizant of their history, would carefully consider weighty issues confronting the state and help fuel social progress, but the failure to attract a diverse audience, especially from among the working classes, weakened the power of history as a tool for spreading good citizenship throughout Wisconsin and the nation. Extension work demanded significant time and effort from faculty in preparing courses, traveling to rural communities, and delivering lectures, but Turner was discovering that simply providing this educational opportunity did not mean that the people would flock to the courses and lectures offered. Disappointed with the limited interest and claiming that he needed more time for his own research, Turner completely ceased to lecture as part of the extension program in 1896, at a time when university extension programs were declining nationally (Billington, 1973; Birge, 1892; Chamberlin, 1893; Curti & Carstensen, 1949a; Kett, 1994; Mood, 1938; Powell, 1892; Rosentreter, 1957; Turner, 1893b; Veysey, 1965).

III

As Turner envisioned it, extension, by connecting education and history, would take knowledge directly to the people, imbue them with respect for the role of average people in shaping the character of the country, and encourage active citizenship. He was bringing the common people into the intellectual life of the university, and he was underscoring the pivotal role of such people in the formation of the country. He was uncovering their place in the past, while also giving them a way to access and think about that voice through extension education. As a number of scholars and historians have pointed out, Turner was successful in many of these efforts. He was one of the first historians to shift the focus of the discipline to deal with the problems of common people rather than solely with the works and times of great political leaders and powerful men. He was an influential historian who, along with other progressive historians, altered the discipline in powerful ways, and scholars continue to wrestle with his influence (see Billington, 1973; Cronon, 1991; Curti, 1961; Hofstadter, 1968; Novick, 1988). By expanding the discipline of history and by campaigning to improve educational opportunities through
extension courses, Turner’s efforts were a triumph for social justice ideals in a country in the midst of significant economic and social change. Once ignored by historians and by universities, the common people slowly were gaining a voice.

Yet, Turner’s failure to sustain a thriving extension program at Wisconsin undermined the relationship between education, history, and democratic citizenship that he so elegantly espoused. This failure, along with Turner’s very real successes, however, informed subsequent reforms. His efforts and the work of other reformers shaping education for a new century helped to establish a greater understanding of the connection between education and social justice. It is worth considering the questions and issues that Turner’s experiences raised.

Turner assumed that people would take advantage of any access to knowledge and education, would reflect critically on what they were learning, and then would act in ways to benefit the nation as a whole as it navigated the transition to a new century. Turner seemed to think that creating the extension program and offering courses would be enough, and that students, sensing their own need for intellectual engagement, would flock to the lecture halls. The common people that Turner hoped to attract, however, may not have been interested in the courses and knowledge that Turner and the other lecturers offered, and the working classes especially often faced challenges—including long work days, limited leisure time, and poor academic preparation—that hindered their ability to take advantage of extension opportunities. These obstacles, combined with Turner’s teaching style, likely discouraged attendance. Although Turner tried to find stories and anecdotes that he thought would interest his audiences, he struggled to find the right language and style to entertain and educate at the same time. His difficulty reflected the challenge of making complex knowledge accessible to an audience with varying educational backgrounds and interests. He espoused thoughtful academic arguments that influenced his field and by many accounts was a gifted orator, but he failed to find the language or approach to make history accessible and meaningful to a diverse audience.

As with many reformers of the era, Turner also never questioned that the masses might not be able to—or, might not want to—transform their thoughts and feelings into actions for the good of the nation. He was promoting action that furthered the needs of society as a whole rather than the needs of the individual, but there was no guarantee that the average citizens sitting in his courses would draw similar conclusions. The lessons of history, especially of individuals facing the frontier alone, could lead Americans to embrace actions and ideas that benefited them, even at the expense of others. Nor was there any guarantee that the average citizens—confronting large bureaucracies, powerful captains of industry, and monopolies—would even have the opportunity to advocate for themselves, much less others. Rather, Turner trusted that if “the degraded tillers of the soil” wrestled with the relationship of the past to the present and appreciated the role that people had played in shaping events, they would be able to use their new energies to shape the future and be better democratic citizens as a result. Turner’s ultimate faith was that people, when given access to knowledge, would reflect on that knowledge and use it to act wisely for the benefit of the nation.

Turner’s evangelical zeal and faith in the common people and extension went only so far, however. While he was bringing the common people into the life of the university and making such people a focus of historical research by asserting their active role in the formation of the nation, he increasingly carved out a separate space for the experts in making sense of that role. Democracy, while it may have rested on hardworking pioneers pushing across the frontier, now, in a time of profound change, required university-trained experts to help the common people understand and make sense of the nation
and their place within it. By 1910, Turner was emphasizing the importance of prolonged study at the university as a basis for expertise and leadership and for a vibrant democracy. “By furnishing well-fitted legislators, public leaders and teachers, by graduating successive armies of enlightened citizens accustomed to deal dispassionately with the problems of modern life, able to think for themselves,” he declared, “the State Universities will safeguard democracy” (Turner, 1910/1994c, pp. 115–116). These “dispassionate” leaders would have to spend long years in the university’s libraries, seminar rooms, and lecture halls to gain expertise. The extension students would never reach such heights by attending one or two extension courses. They were getting a taste of an academic life, but this taste made it clear that they would not be the experts. Only prolonged exposure to debate and discussion and sustained reflection and engagement with ideas would prepare the leaders of the future.

By arguing that education and historical knowledge were central to democracy and by championing an extension program, Turner raised provocative questions that educators continue to wrestle with today: What obstacles prevent students of all ages from taking advantage of educational opportunities, and how can these obstacles be overcome? Are teachers able to reach out in meaningful ways to connect with their students? Does education lead to action, and to what kind of action? How much education is necessary to prepare students to become leaders and experts, and who determines what these experts need to know? When it comes to understanding the connection between education and citizenship, between education and opportunity, between education and social justice, Turner’s ideas and work continue to inform, perhaps even to inspire, but certainly to raise questions worth considering and debating. For Turner, that may have been the ultimate goal of history and education: to raise ideas and questions, to bring all into the discussion in meaningful ways, and to debate solutions and actions for the good of society.

References


