

# New York City: teaching a global city

*This article outlines a short scheme of work taught to year 9 students about New York City and its status as a global city. Outlined here is a rationale for teaching students about New York as well as a discussion about the processes and resources used.*



Accompanying  
online materials

Take a seat. Now close your eyes. Clear your mind, and imagine that you have just won tickets for the holiday of a lifetime. The destination? ... New York City.

I smile as I look around the classroom and see 25 silent year 9 students lost in a dream world of yellow taxis, shopping bags, Broadway shows, basketball games, skyscrapers and a 100 other iconic images of New York City. But New York City is a dream destination for more than just my year 9 class: visited by 44 million tourists a year, and home to over 8 million people, this is a city with some serious global appeal.

## What is a global city?

Sassen (1991) cites New York as a prime example of a global city. She identifies a range of indicators that determine a city's global status, including cultural diversity, conglomeration of power and finance and iconic cultural nature. This scheme of work sought to explore and evaluate the extent to which New York fulfils these criteria whilst also considering the changes the city put into place in order to facilitate its global growth. To this end our key enquiry questions were as follows:

1. To what extent can New York be considered a 'global city'?
2. How did New York become a global city?

## Why teach about New York?

My passion for New York came, not from films and famous American TV series, nor from my experiences as a tourist, but from my experiences as an undergraduate geographer given the opportunity to visit the city and explore it through a geographical lens. This lens enabled me to appreciate New York in very different ways and caused me to question representations of the city in popular culture. I was fascinated to learn of New York's former dark and disturbing reputation – an image that seemed entirely alien

to someone who had grown up with a perception of New York as a city of wealth and power. Yet, standing looking over the site of ground zero, I realised for the first time the fragile nature of our global economic hubs. As I looked across a site that once represented the power and wealth of capitalist America, all I saw was rubble and memories of lost loved ones. New York became in my eyes a city of contrasts, with large areas of nature fighting against an ever-expanding skyline, areas of great wealth bordering those of social deprivation, and a diversity of ethnicities the like of which I had never experienced on such a scale before.

As a beginning teacher, I also wanted to teach something that I really wanted to teach – something I had learnt from my degree, rather than something dictated by a specification or prescribed in someone else's scheme of work. However, my commitment was more than just personal interest: I truly believe that New York is a fantastic city to study, and that studying it can make a valuable contribution to students' understanding of globalisation.

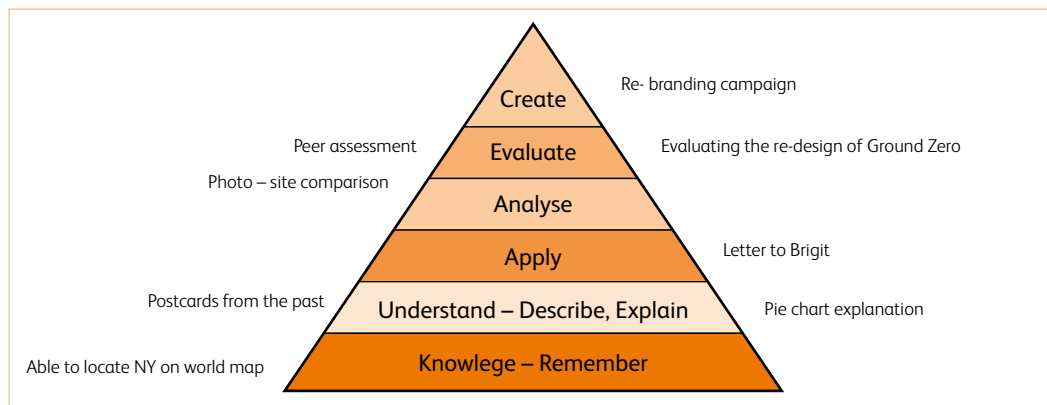
So why is it so important for my students, living 3,000 miles away, to study global cities such as New York? As my year 9's daydreams proved, New York is a global city that many *think* they know, and which some students may even have had the good fortune to have experienced first-hand. Yet how frequently do we ask them to look beyond the stereotypical tourist attractions and see the alternative perspectives of this apparently familiar place. My aim in designing this scheme of work was to draw on Sassen's (1991) criteria in order to challenge students to explore how New York has been largely altered into a global city through human actions. Mass migration, the deliberate rebranding campaign in the 1970's, and the devastating effects of the 9/11 terror attacks on the twin towers in the heart of the financial district, were core components of the unit of study. Students were encouraged to explore the broader geographical concepts from Sassen through a range of teaching and learning strategies

## Teaching and learning strategies

Students were introduced to the concept of place rebranding – a popular feature of many A level specifications – in order to identify how New York has altered its one-time image of high-crime rates, drugs racketeering and extreme poverty and degradation to become a global icon. To do this students were shown a series of video clips from a useful programme entitled 'Nightmare in the city that never sleeps' and were asked to identify problems the city faced and possible



**Figure 1:** What do year 9s think of when they imagine New York?  
**Photo:** Anna Totterdell



**Figure 2:** Bloom's taxonomy (revised), based on an APA adaptation of Anderson and Krathwohl (2001).  
Source: [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)

reasons for these problems. Students were then introduced to the concept of rebranding through a demonstration of popular products that have been rebranded such as Opal fruit sweets. A cloze activity then ensured students had a background knowledge of the how New York utilised the rebranding concept to become the first ever example of place marketing. Having understood how New York was successfully rebranded, students were then challenged to apply a globally recognised concept to their local area, a north Nottinghamshire ex-mining community. Students found this activity really enjoyable and they took on the challenge of re-presenting their place with energy, enthusiasm and some interesting geographical perspectives. Students used ICT, images and music to create a rebranding scheme for their local area, including a logo, slogan and jingle before their peers evaluated how successful they felt these campaigns would be.

Migration is a common concept in most key stage 3 schemes of work and GCSE exam specifications. Through this scheme of work students were taught how the causes of migration alter over time. Using a mystery students were asked to identify push and pull factors for Irish migrants coming to New York during the Irish potato famine. This activity was designed to provide the stimulus for a further discussion on how New York is a city with a diverse ethnic make-up which is often visually very apparent within particular spatial areas of New York such as China Town and Little Italy. Mapping the city helped students to appreciate the very distinctive ethnic characteristics of each area.

One of the most appealing characteristics of studying geography is the subject's ability to improve one's geographical imaginations through the use of images. When examining the alterations in the use of the former site of the twin towers, I asked students to consider

how the site might be viewed through different geographical lenses by a range of stakeholders, including business tycoons, developers and relatives of those who died there. I also saw this as an opportunity to improve students' visual literacy by examining and annotating a range of photos of the twin towers site to compare how the function of a site can be altered by human activity.

Throughout this scheme of work students constantly built on their prior knowledge as they examined the multi-faceted nature of New York as a global city, before demonstrating their understanding of new geographical concepts such as rebranding through creative, practical examples. The level of challenge increased throughout the scheme to reflect students increasing cognitive development provided through a variety of activities as related to the revised version of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom and Krathwohl, 1965) shown in Figure 2.

I believe that students engaged so readily with this scheme of work as they were able to identify the relevance to their own lives. Many students were able to recognise iconic New York locations from popular media sources and were able to cite copied examples of the now world famous 'I ♥ NY' rebranding campaign. New York no longer felt 3000 miles away, one of the world's leading global cities suddenly became a great deal more local.

Globalisation is a key concept in geography and we are constantly reminded in the press and elsewhere that we live in a global era. Whilst New York is a fascinating example we have to be careful not to reinforce students 'touristic' perceptions of the place. Understanding the global nature of the city enabled students to appreciate New York as a more fallible and ever-changing place. | **TG**

## References

- Anderson, L. W., and Krathwohl D. R. (eds) (2001). *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. New York: Longman.
- Bloom, B. S. and Krathwohl, D. R. (1965) *The Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals. Handbook 1: Cognitive Domain*. New York: D McKay.
- Sassen, S. (1991) *The Global City*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.



**Figure 3:** The 'I ♥ NY' rebranding campaign began in 1977 and was designed by Graphic designer Milton Glaesar to sell New York as a tourist destination. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks he produced a modified version reading 'I Love NY More Than Ever'.  
Photo: Ruth Totterdell

## Online resources

Go to [www.geography.org.uk/tg](http://www.geography.org.uk/tg) and click 'Autumn 2011' to find Sophie's lesson plans and resources for this unit of work.



**Sophie King** successfully completed her NQT year as a teacher of Geography at a school in North Nottinghamshire after graduating from a PGCE course at the University of Nottingham 2009-2010. In September she joined the Geography department at Gresham's School in Holt, North Norfolk.

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