

The Cloud Challenge

by Pat Fiorello



As a fellow artist and watercolor instructor, I know how eager we artists are to learn and improve our skills. It seems adult learners are especially impatient to see quick results.

Earlier this year, I developed an innovative approach to accelerate my own learning. While I focused on one particular subject for my study, the approach has broad application to any learning challenge that you may face.

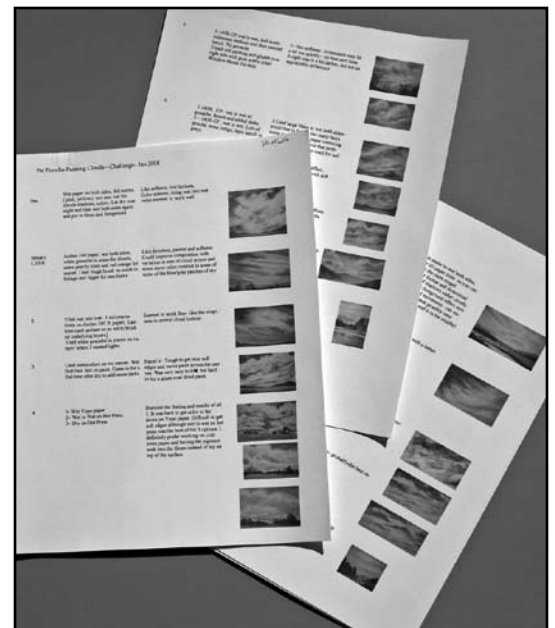
My aim was to optimize my process and technique for painting skies and clouds. I was familiar with the popular Language Immersion programs that help people learn foreign languages in a short timeframe. With that in mind, I invented a game for myself called the “January Cloud Challenge” to learn as much as possible in a condensed window of time. Rather than the traditional approach of taking several months or longer to do a series of

Create a game to accelerate your learning!

large paintings, I committed to painting at least one cloud study/painting each day during the month of January. (It didn't need to be the actual clouds on that day, but any type of sky). The only stipulation was that I needed to try something different every day and document it.

I painted each day, no matter what. Even when I went out of town for a weekend, I took my travel paint set with me. I stretched out beyond my familiar methods and tested a variety of papers/surfaces, techniques, and special watercolor mediums. It was a good opportunity to try out all those supplies I had bought, like Yupo and watercolor canvas, and stuck in the closet thinking I'd test them out someday. I also bought some new things to try out, like iridescent medium. The notion of it being a game or challenge opened me up to all sorts of experimentation.

By the end of the month, I completed 45 small paintings of clouds and had created a valuable journal documenting my learning. I kept the journal on my computer and each day recorded the date, how I approached the painting that day, (noting the type of paper, technique used etc.), lessons learned from that “experiment” – what I thought worked well and what approaches didn't turn out, and a thumbnail photo of the finished piece. This allowed me to connect the finished pieces with the approaches they were created with, so that I could replicate the approaches I liked in the future. I supplemented this exercise with reading books on masters like Turner, Constable and others who immersed themselves in cloud painting. I also focused on taking lots of reference photos during this period. As a result, I gained a wealth of knowledge about what works well (and as importantly, what doesn't) for capturing the essence of clouds in just one month. This has been a springboard for developing a major series of larger sized paintings, which I am currently working on.



Pat kept track of her progress on her computer.

While my “immersion“ project for a month was focused on clouds, you could use this same approach for any subject or area that you want to get a deeper knowledge of. It’s a great way to accelerate your learning and quickly determine your own personal favorite process. Consider where you could use this example as a model for creating your own “immersion” projects with a structure that provides rapid feedback and learning.

Think about where you could create a learning challenge for yourself next month!

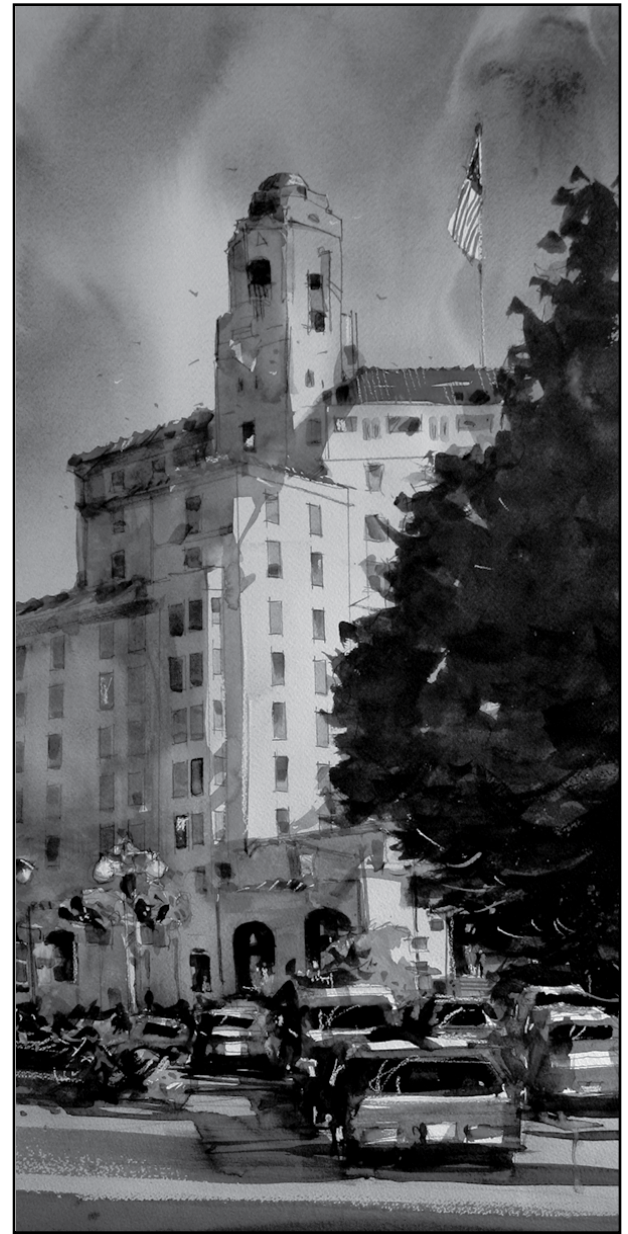
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Clouds - January 15, 2008 by Pat Fiorello



A Work in Progress by Brenda Beck Fisher



Arlington by Richard Stephens