How can I best learn from the Internet?

Very simply, you *can't* learn from the internet. Sorry! End of article. Oh, you think I should qualify that? Well, ok. Sure, you can find information, and even answers, but learning involves more than information. To learn you must be able to weigh the information for truth and importance, then analyse where it fits into your picture of the world. For an unbeliever, that's where learning stops (2 Tim 3:7), and that's why education will never be the eureka they expect. But as a Christian, learning is much greater. You must ultimately analyse where the information fits in God's picture of the world, and understand it in relationship with Him. So when I say you cannot learn from the internet, I'm not just talking about getting information, but about becoming acquainted with the information in a way that leads to wisdom.

Please note that I'm not opposed to finding facts on the internet. That's something I do daily to help me in a range of tasks from designing circuit boards to finding Scripture passages. But while facts can be useful and can often be immediately applied without thinking much, they aren't learning. Learning implies increasing understanding for benefit next time around.

To illustrate, let's suppose that you know from the scream that your neighbour has hurt himself while working in his shed. If you file that information and do nothing about it then that shows that you haven't learned from the information. You become like the man that James 1:23 mentions, who looks in the mirror, but before he can improve his appearance he forgets what he saw. But if you try to fit the information into your understanding of the world, and particularly into God's understanding of loving your neighbour as yourself, then you have learned something, and that will direct you to help him, and to do so quickly.

Back to the internet. We must consider that what we tend to mean by the 'internet' is mostly just one big index. A very well cross-referenced index into a trillion (in 2008) odd pages of facts and fiction in forms that, to some degree, already existed even before the internet. The internet helps you to find stuff, and then links you to other related stuff. The index itself is only an easy door to the learning process. The learning itself takes hard work: extended reading, real analysis, and spiritual thought.

One corollary of this is that you shouldn't choose material simply because it's free. Since you're going to spend a lot of effort anyway, you may be getting more value if you choose something that costs money. Having said that, a lot of free stuff can also be very good.

With all this in mind, let's consider some of the classes of material available to be found via this index.

Books

Here is a tried and true way of learning. The internet is a good way to find books – if you know what to look for. You'll search a selection that is larger than any library you could visit. But Solomon mentioned in Ecclesiastes 12:12 that book-learning can weary the body. So, two things to watch out for are:

1) It's difficult to find *good* books (or *wise* books, to use Solomon's word). It takes considerable advance knowledge and careful analysis. In fact, it's generally easier to select *good* books by going to a church book-stall than on the internet because someone has already helped you sift out the tares.

2) To learn by books, you still have to do the hard work of reading. So you'll actually *save* time if you *take* time to find out which books are good. Read the reviews (especially search for Christian book reviews). And once you find good books, you can learn a lot, if you read and study them.

Articles

These are easier and quicker to write (and to read) than books. Because they're quick, it may feel like you're learning more than by reading books, but you could actually be learning less. Since articles are easier to write than books, the author doesn't have to know so much about what he's talking about (like me, for example). And unless it is an academic paper, the editor will often be less stringent. Consider the credentials of both author and editor when deciding how much to trust articles.

Blogs

One use for blogs is to communicate with relatives. Or another is for pure entertainment. There's nothing wrong with that, but just be aware that it's part of your 'entertainment budget', not your 'learning budget'. It can be easy to fritter your time just keeping up. But if you want to learn, then my comments are the same as for books and articles but with a few extra 'gotchas'. There is usually no editor at all, so everything depends on the reliability of the author. Plus, the author may have a personal target to blog once a week just to keep his readership interested. Be aware that there may be weeks where he has nothing substantial to say. Try to find an author that challenges your thinking in a godly way. It might pay to ask someone for recommendations. You could perhaps start with the Gospel Coalition blog.

News

What about news? Well, again, don't fool yourself that you're learning. Most news is just for your R&R. But if you listen to the news because you want to stay relevant, then it's going to take real work: analysis and biblical reflection. Otherwise your relevance will quickly become irrelevant to society's true needs. You can find good social commentary, but you have to look. What we really want to aspire to is gospel reflection on the news – like what Jesus does in Luke 13:1-8. He engages with the news from God's point of view. The website themightiestsword.com contains good examples for us to follow, for engaging in this way, and frequently also the kiwifruitblog.org. This is what ambassadors of Christ really aspire to (2 Cor 5:16-21). The recipe is a simple function of balance: you have to be more in Christ than with the news (Rom 12:2).

Courses

Education accessed via the internet is on the rise, and some good stuff can be found from both secular sources and theological seminaries. These can be very valuable if you have the opportunity to put in the hard yards to study it. Like you would for any school, ask others who know about them.

Forums

Well, here you can find and ask for answers: both wrong and right. And that's perfectly legitimate. But once again, use your head and look for reasons, not just answers. At a rough guess from my experience, technical forums have about 50% of the comments giving a correct answer, and only about 5% are backed up by substantial reasons. If you are asking religious questions, it may be that only 20% of the comments are correct. You need to assess the reasons given to determine whether the answer is correct. Secular forums can be useful. But I would suggest that unmoderated religious forums are full of enough doubtful rigour and time-wasters that you'd need to be full of the Spirit (1 John 2:20f) and a real Bible scholar with time to burn. And I don't know many of those.

Reading online

If you prefer to read online, go for it. But it may depend on what you're reading for.

Reading online is more intense: it's easier to lose your place (especially if you are linking through several different articles at once). You will be less able to engage with someone else in the same room, so you may find reading from paper to be better when relaxing with your wife.

If you're reading to learn, then reading from a printed book has some particular advantages. You can underline important sections of a book for later reflection, and I have found it very useful to reference significant sections or quotable quotes in the rear cover of the book with a page number for easy reference later. This makes the book much more useful to refer to later. Mark-up like this can be done on an e-reader, but it is more difficult to do, and is more easily lost.

If you subscribe to a magazine that has articles worth referring to others, then printing a few pages as a pdf and storing them that way in a folder can be helpful for forwarding or later reference. I store mine in folders by category. Don't forget to back up your storage, though!

Determining reliability

How can you know whether to trust something on the internet? This is a big area, and I'm no expert. I can but give you the practical tips that I use.

- On the internet you *have* to be a sceptic. Assume something is probably untrustworthy unless you have good reason to believe it. Yes, you can learn from something that is not trustworthy, but only if you spend the time to weigh it.
- So look at the reasoning given (Acts 17:11). If you can't understand the reasons or you can't align them with Scripture, then don't trust it. To learn from it, you need to really understand the reasoning. This will take time, I'm sorry.
- Consider whether it is recommended by other trusted sources. God is our example in that he attests trustworthiness by reliable or many witnesses, especially for important matters (1 John 5:6-12, 1 Corinthians 15:3ff, Ruth 4:9ff).
- Weigh it in the light of God's revelation (1 John 5:9), and in His view of things. There's just no substitute for being familiar with God's way of thinking revealed in His Word.

Here is the trap. The internet is chock full of links to books, articles, and blogs. Your job is to find those which are good, and the important thing is to remember that most of them are worthless. Don't assume that it's a good article just because you agree with it! In fact, that's a very real danger with the internet. You can always find something to read that your ears want to hear – and then you won't be inclined to learn from it at all.

Finally, please try not to forward or post about something just because it agrees with you – unless you have some reason to know that it will actually benefit them. They won't have time to learn very well themselves if they're keeping up with you. (Hmmm ... my elder is going to remind me that I said this next time I forward him something).

In summary, the internet is not as useful for learning as you might think. Actual learning takes careful effort, analysis, and spiritual thought: we shouldn't be deceived into thinking we're learning just by knowing stuff from the internet. Spend more time on less material. Do the hard work; weigh everything, hold fast what is good, and recommend sparingly: less is more.

> Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil."
>
> 1 Thessalonians 5:19ff

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