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Sesame Workshop, IBM Launch Early-Childhood Education Initiative

By Todd Spangler ▾



Courtesy of Sesame Workshop



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Cookie Monster, Elmo and friends are about to hit a new digital learning curve.

Sesame Workshop, the not-for-profit org that produces "Sesame Street," and tech giant IBM have entered into a partnership to develop new personalized educational products and platforms for preschool-age kids – with the goal of transforming the ways children learn and teachers teach.

Under the three-year agreement, Sesame Workshop and Big Blue will design interactive educational experiences for use in homes and schools that adapt to the learning preferences and aptitude levels of individual preschoolers.

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For now, the organizations are treating the project as an R&D investment. IBM and Sesame Street will deploy engineers, educators and researchers to work side-by-side in classrooms and in their own labs and learning facilities. Later this year, they plan to test and share prototypes with leading teachers, academics, researchers, technologists, gamers, performers and media execs to solicit feedback and brainstorm ways in which cognitive computing can best help preschoolers learn.

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Execs positioned the effort as akin to the way the original creators of "Sesame Street" consulted with education experts to help conceive the show in the late 1960s.

"A generation ago, 'Sesame Street' used the ubiquitous presence of television to reach vulnerable children who did not have access to the learning opportunities that affluent and middle-class kids did. It worked very well," Sesame Workshop CEO Jeffrey Dunn said in announcing the initiative. "Now, through this collaboration with IBM and Watson, we expect to develop the next generation of tailored learning tools."

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The alliance will combine the content expertise of Sesame Workshop, which has conducted more than



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Watson's natural-language processing, pattern recognition and other cognitive-computing technologies. The Watson team will refine the educational tools based on testing with anonymized groups of students.

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"Watson is uniquely suited to tackling one of society's most pressing and important challenges – the way in which our young children learn," said Harriet Green, IBM's G.M. for Watson IoT, Commerce and Education.

Examples of concepts IBM and Sesame Workshop have sketched out include:

- Super-smart toys, like a plush Elmo that engages directly with a child, listening and using the information to create playful activities. The toy adapts to children's developmental skills over time using cognitive-computing capabilities. For example, after kids master counting to 20, Elmo can start practicing counting to 30 together with them.
- A learn-to-read app that reads along with a child, creating interactive play experiences that use his or her own words (like "let's play ball with the dog"). Using Watson's capabilities, the app analyzes a child's response in real time and dynamically adapts content based on a child's interests.
- A classroom tool that helps teachers create educational experiences tailored to needs of individual students, as well as create activities tailored to the unique interests of groups of children.

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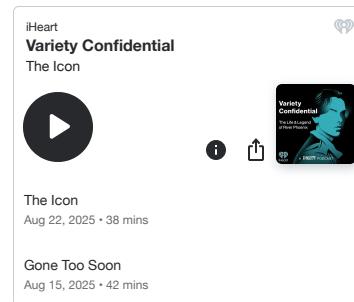
Among the advisers tapped by Sesame Workshop and IBM is Todd Rose, director of mind, brain and education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "This partnership has the potential to meet the unique educational needs of every child, whether it's through customized content or kid-friendly tools that empower each child to find his or her own path to learning," Rose said.

Read More About: IBM, Sesame Street, Sesame Workshop

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