



Brought to you by the letters A and I: Sesame Workshop, IBM developing edtech for pre-schoolers

Lora Kolodny 10:16 AM PDT · April 28, 2016

IMAGE CREDITS:
JOHN O'BOYLE, FEATURE PHOTO SERVICE FOR IBM / IBM AND SESAME WORKSHOP (IMAGE HAS BEEN MODIFIED)

If you think Tickle Me Elmo is freaky already, wait until those talking monsters can beat you at *Jeopardy!*.

[Sesame Workshop](#), the educational nonprofit behind Sesame Street and its iconic characters, this week announced a partnership with [IBM Watson](#) to develop edtech for pre-school children.

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Sesame Workshop is no newcomer to tech. The organization previously set up a [venture fund](#) in partnership with Collaborative Fund. And they currently offer mobile games, story apps, e-books and digital Family Toolkits to help parents and caregivers navigate challenging topics like autism, incarceration, and more.

The new partnership will see IBM drawing on Sesame Workshop's deep well of educational research, experts and content. And IBM will help Sesame Workshop figure out how it could apply advanced technology in its own educational products and research.

A child's experiences in the first five years of their life will influence his or her learning and development over the long haul. These experiences encompass what's happening at home, in daycare and pre-school, and of course, a child's media use.

Harriet Green, a General Manager of IBM's Watson Internet of Things, Commerce and Education group, said tech companies have too long neglected the pre-K category, perhaps not seeing an immediately lucrative opportunity there the way that they have in corporate training.

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Developing tech to assist parents, educators and care givers of pre-school children could help families ensure that all children have the tools they need for academic and social success once they get to kindergarten, she said.

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Watson could be used to power “personalized learning” features in apps or interactive toys that gather and analyze data about what kids are learning and at what pace, especially using the platform’s natural language understanding capabilities.

IBM’s Chalapathy Neti, a vice president for education innovation within IBM’s Watson Education group explained, “We could see if a child knows the word ‘wheel,’ and understands it in a broader context like wheels belong on a car, and wheels and cars are in the category of transportation.”

Using the notion of “context exploration,” he said, IBM and Sesame Workshop could identify when a child has mastered a subject, or needs help with it, then automatically assist learners and educators to close the gaps.

Operationally, Harriet Green said IBM employees will be working alongside the Sesame Workshop team in its New York City office to figure out what’s possible and wanted in the pre-K education market over a period of three years.

A number of educational researchers will also be involved as advisors to the Sesame Workshop and IBM partnership. These scientists will ensure that Watson is ingesting credible and essential scientific data on early childhood learning to guide the way it helps to assess and teach kids.

The partners have not pre-determined how many products they will launch or who will own and sell those products.

All data gathering and use of the technologies they develop will require parents to opt-in explicitly.

Sesame Workshop CEO Jeffrey Dunn wasn’t immediately available to discuss the partnership with TechCrunch but has a new blog here about [early childhood learning](#).

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