

EdWeek Market Brief

Analyst's View

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New Digital Learning Channel Poised to Create Big Opportunities for Vendors

*Two Organizations, First Book and Games and Learning, Are Launching a Forum
Meant to Pair Schools With High-Quality Ed Tech*

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Contributing Writer



For nearly three decades, a Washington, D.C.-based company called First Book has

served as a network through which thousands of educators in the U.S. and overseas can buy educational materials and other basic necessities at an affordable cost.

It's also served as a vehicle through which material providers can get their products in front of a wide audience.

Through a new partnership with a digital educational materials organization, First Book will create a new digital marketplace for a wide range of ed-tech products in an arrangement that could have big implications for companies across the K-12 marketplace.

Specifically, [First Book](#) and [Games and Learning](#), which provides solutions to help parents and teachers find, buy and adopt high-quality children's content, are building a new digital learning channel for digital games, e-books, programs and audio/video materials.

For products on the platform, Games and Learning says all marketing claims associated with the products will be fact-checked to ensure products show accuracy of their value, including incorporating completed research, internal testing, or third-party studies.

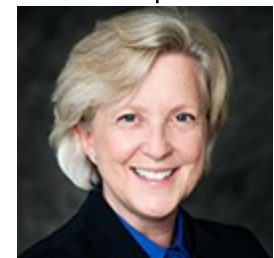
In addition, First Book and Games and Learning will look to host digital learning products on the channel — products born of research funded by agencies including the U.S. Department of Education, National Science Foundation or National Institutes of Health.

About These Analysts

Michelle Miller is the co-founder and president of Games and Learning. She previously headed PBS KIDS Interactive during its startup phase.



Kyle Zimmer is the president, CEO, and co-founder of First Book, a nonprofit that maintains a marketplace hosting educational resources for educators that serve children in need.



Games and Learning in July received roughly \$250,000 through a grant from the National Science Foundation Small Business Innovation and Research program, to support the digital learning channel.

Major components of the new channel have already been tested with First Book members, and the prototype version launching this week will offer more opportunities for teacher feedback and focus groups.

EdWeek Market Brief contributing writer Brian Bradley asked First Book President, CEO and co-founder Kyle Zimmer and Games and Learning president and co-founder Michelle Miller about the types of products to be featured on the marketplace, who is likely to use the marketplace, and the channel's potential implications on district bidding processes.

What would you say is the value proposition of the marketplace?

Miller: We help teachers find, buy, and adopt high-quality digital learning resources for kids. That's our goal. The second point that follows from that is that we want the highest-quality resources to connect with the kids who could benefit the most, and that's where First Book comes in for us.

We also know from our own research and other surveys in the field, including those by Project Tomorrow, Common Sense Media and NewSchools Venture Fund, that we've crossed the barrier where educators see the value in these tools. They have increasing access to budget and devices, so that's still a challenge in some ways. However, they're struggling to find the products that deliver on marketing promises and that fulfill their students' needs. And that's a fundamental barrier that we're solving.

How will this channel bring benefits to end-users and educators?

Miller: We are going to de-risk this process for teachers by saying we've already found the things that show value. Part of the way we do that is we identify the digital learning products that have already been vetted in some ways. They've already been funded with research funded by the Department of Education or the National Science

Foundation or other federal agencies or nonprofits in the field.

So, we're able to surface those products for those teachers and then display them in a way that makes it easier for teachers to say, "Yes, this particular challenge that I'm trying to solve in my classroom with these devices and these students, this is a good fit for me."

What's the profile of First Book users?

Miller: In terms of the First Book members that were surveyed, more than half of them have been using digital learning resources every day. So, 52 percent said they're using them every day. Eighty percent said they're using them at least several times per week. And I think a key stat for us in 2019 was that 59 percent said that they were using digital learning resources more than they had the previous year. We also see the percentage of individual teachers who say that they're influencing the buying process for digital learning resources increasing year over year. So, we're seeing that usage increase year over year; we're seeing the influence of those teachers increase year over year. And so, we're meeting that demand.

Zimmer: The thrilling part in the value proposition of working with Michelle and her team is that using the channels, using the big systems we've already built, we have a fantastic opportunity to catapult these efforts and these resources into the hands of the people who are already engaged and ready and waiting. We feel that we have the vaccine for a critical illness, for a critical situation that's jeopardizing not just the lives of the kids, but our communities and our nation as a whole, and now we're seeking funding so that we can distribute that vaccine, we can administer it. We know it works. We've built the system, and we're ready to go.

Is the marketplace likely to change from its first iteration—a week, a month, some period of time down the line?

Miller: Always. The way that we look at it is the most important framework that we've established in terms of the prototype at this stage is we looked at how to help teachers find the resources. So, we're working very hard to surface the best possible products so

that they don't have to go hunting for them on Google. That's number one. Number two, we are focused on what is the information and the pricing structure that will help them to more easily make the decision about what they're going to purchase or download. So, what do they need to know about the product?

We're focused on new funding proposals around the adoption of it—once they actually have these tools, what does implementation look like for them?



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How will Games and Learning specifically be involved in this marketplace?

Miller: From a Games and Learning perspective, we see the need to be able to solve the distribution problem for digital learning, and the partnership with First Book allows us to do that in three very unique ways. One way is that we have worked with First Book over the course of six or seven years now, to conduct research including surveys and focus groups with First Book educators, to try to go beyond the standard numbers. Are you interested in digital learning products? We know that they are.

And the second advantage you see with solving the distribution problem?

Miller: Number two is primarily to serve underserved students. Games and Learning is a for-profit C corp., but at our heart is really trying to make sure that the students who could benefit the most are being connected to the highest-quality digital learning tools. That's important to our mission. And [the third factor] with First Book gives us this built-in audience that's already spending money within the First Book marketplace, and that is extremely rare.

We are creating the digital learning channel within that existing marketplace, and that allows us to take advantage of, frankly, a captive and highly engaged audience that First Book has built over 28 years.

What kind of products are being sold on this marketplace?

Miller: The products that are sold on the digital learning channel will include all types of engaging student-centered digital learning materials, and the student-centered part is important to us. That includes digital games, learning apps, podcasts, interactive video, interactive e-book platforms. We're also looking at some AR/VR applications that have a web component.

The key differentiator, in terms of the digital learning channel that we're launching on the First Book marketplace, is that we're focused on materials that are web-based, rather than native apps. The reason for that is that we've done years of research with our partners at First Book on what the classroom setup actually looks like for these teachers.

So what kinds of web-based products are we talking about?

Miller: Our first set of products are covering a range. We are primarily focused, out of the gate, on products that serve grades 3 to 5, though it ends up being broader than that. Many products serve from grades K through 6. That's a fairly typical range. That's not to say we won't eventually serve K-12.

We are planning to be able to cover all of the key subjects that teachers are looking for, including literacy, science, math, social and emotional learning, and art. What is most important from my perspective is a lot of the answer to the question you just asked is driven by [funding and RFPs]. And we really look forward to putting these products in front of First Book educators and being able to collect feedback from them so that they can reveal the gaps in subject matter, in skill requirements, the kinds of products that they are looking for. That could truly serve their communities and their students, and that we, in turn, can represent those needs and help to inform investments and RFPs.

In what ways will the new games platform increase visibility for educational games? Did you have any thoughts on that?

Miller: We've never seen more truly high-quality digital learning content than we do at this moment. It's never been a more exciting time for that, and there's nothing more frustrating to me than knowing that that content exists and teachers and parents are looking for it, but the teachers and parents can't find it and the highest-quality producers are going out of business or they're struggling for sustainability.

That disconnect makes me crazy. So, I couldn't be more happy that we are accumulating this list of committed content providers. These are leading companies. And we are going to present them in the most effective way possible to First Book members, so that First Book members can really feel like they can make informed choices.

And those First Book members, then, will help the kids who could benefit the most to actually experience these products. And part of what we're doing is, we are going through the products that have already received the support of, the validation from, the Department of Education, the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes for Health—they've already been backed by, in some cases, millions of dollars in research. And in some cases, they sit on a virtual shelf, collecting virtual dust and we're about to change that.

How would this marketplace inform investments and RFPs?

Miller: On the list of things that make us crazy is that it feels as though investments and funding and grants are not always directed towards the subject, the skill set that are truly in demand, in terms of the educators in the classroom. First Book gives us a unique opportunity to be able to represent their voices and say, "These are the kinds of things that are truly needed."

And then our goal at Games and Learning is to influence the investors and the funders, and to say if you put out an RFP for this type of tool that's available in these languages for these students, we know that there is going to be a significant number of educators

who are going to benefit from that and students who will benefit from that.

Zimmer: One of the really powerful components of this partnership is that it's market-driven. It is based on the feedback of practitioners who know what they're doing, who are in the field, who are in the lives of kids every day.

First Book has representation from about 70 percent of Title I schools in its network, across the U.S.

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When does this go live?

Miller: We're going live in a prototype version this week. The main component that separates the prototype from what will be the full channel is the number of full products that are offered. So we're going live with a very limited number of products, from a set of content partners who have just been absolutely essential in developing this plan and have really taken the leap with us.

Will there be limitations or parameters on what will or will not be sold?

Miller: All of the digital learning products that are offered on the marketplace meet or exceed educators' expectations for high quality. We've conducted years of research with First Book educators, trying to understand what criteria they're using to find, buy and adopt the digital learning products that they select for their students. Based on that, Games and Learning has developed an original scorecard, we call it, that maps each product's detail to three types of standards—one is good for students, two is easy for educators to use, and three is high-value.

So, across each one of those three parameters, we map for each product, how it fits those particular needs. Our approach is to do away with marketing-speak. These are all, in our evaluations, five-star products. It's more a question of is it the right fit for what you're looking for, and you're going to use the scorecard to figure that out.

What other requirements are there for products to be sold in the marketplace?

Miller: We also require that all products that are being offered within the First Book marketplace are provided at a discount for First Book educators. Those educators are serving underserved students, and we want them to be able to access these resources at a discount, and they also have to meet or exceed industry standards for student privacy and data security.



One of the really powerful components of this partnership is that it's market-driven. It is based on the feedback of practitioners who know what they're doing, who are in the field, who are in the lives of kids every day.

Who's going to be using this market? Is it just going to be individual parents and teachers, or are entire school districts going to do purchasing through it?

Miller: With the initial pilot with First Book, we are focused on serving the needs of classroom teachers, librarians, and media specialists. The next step is to be able to expand and offer those same resources for teachers outside of the First Book network, as well as for families at home. Games and Learning's long-term vision is to create a consumer-driven platform to provide the highest-quality digital media for kids.

Zimmer: First Book has been focused on the individual teachers. These are about 450,000 educators who are librarians and media specialists and health professionals and homeless shelter folks. They are serving, in formal settings and informal settings, the educational needs of kids in poverty. They come from all fifty states; they come from Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, all provinces of Canada as well. We have focused on individual practitioners, because we recognize that there is a special power for those people.

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