Token Economies

What is a token economy?

- Token economies are programs in which students (entire classrooms or individuals) earn points or tokens for appropriate behavior and, at a later time, trade them for preferred activities, objects, or privileges.
- One of the most positive aspects of token economies is that they are set up to reinforce appropriate behavior and prevent inappropriate behavior, thereby minimizing the need to use reactive strategies in dealing with inappropriate behavior.

How do I set up a token economy?

- Set goals for your token economy. A token economy is a tool which strives to modify inappropriate behavior and achieve specific goals. These goals can be behavioral (i.e., staying in seat during class time, raising hand and waiting to be called on before speaking, being on time for class) as well as academic (i.e., finishing at least 80% of homework, handing in work when it is completed, mastering 30 new vocabulary words). Take time to include the student(s) in setting and defining goals. Begin by targeting only one to three goals so that the student is not overwhelmed.

- Set point or token (PT) values. Give a token value to each goal. You may choose to make each goal of equal value or to weight values. In the latter case, values should be assigned with respect to the difficulty of the goal. For example, if remaining seated is of lesser difficulty for the student than not speaking out of turn, remaining seated should be worth fewer points or tokens. Additionally, it is useful and appropriate to reward tokens for partial achievement of a goal. For example, you might award two tokens for remaining seated for the whole class period and one token for remaining seated for 75% of the period.

- Determine time intervals for assessment. Intervals at which goal attainment will be judged and points will be awarded need to be determined before initiating the token economy. For some students, evaluation may take place every half hour and, for others, after the morning and afternoon. A good rule of thumb is, at the onset of the token economy, the interval should be half as long as the student is able to go without displaying the inappropriate behavior. For example, if the student can go for a half hour without leaving his or her seat, the initial time interval should be 15 minutes. Gradually, time intervals should be increased. It is important that tokens are awarded contingent upon achieving the pre-specified goals.
• **Keep track of points or tokens earned.** Keeping track of tokens earned can be done in many different ways. This allows the student to see and assess his or her progress. The student(s) should always be able to find out how many tokens or points they have earned. Here are some suggestions:

1) **Tokens:** Give the student(s) the tokens they have earned. The student(s) must understand that once they are given the tokens, they are responsible for not losing them, or put a container somewhere in the room where the student can deposit and have access to earned tokens.

2) **Points:** Using a point system is very valuable when targeting more than one behavior or goal. The student(s) can see which goals they are reaching and in which areas they can still improve.

3) A card listing the goals and leaving space for each interval can be carried by the student or held by the teacher (this is useful if the student has many classrooms). The points earned for each interval would be entered by the teacher after each interval in the appropriate space.

4) A chart can be posted in the room (on the student's desk or near the teacher’s desk) in which students’ points are tracked. In this way, a student can see his or her progress over time. Keeping formal records is very important. This will help prevent misunderstandings and disagreements about the rules.

**How can students use their tokens?**

When setting the token economy, it should be decided, with input from the student, what the student will be able to "buy" with his or her tokens and how often he or she will be able to cash them in. This is critical since some students may give up if they do not have the opportunity to earn some reward each day. In such cases, you should structure the point system so that it is possible to earn enough points to trade each day. For example, if it is possible to earn 40 points per day, 30 points may be worth 15 minutes of computer time which the student could "buy" at the end of each day. Other students may be more motivated by bigger reinforcers, i.e., at least 30 points each day for a week being worth no math homework for the weekend. Make sure that you allow the student to spend his or her own tokens.

**Can a token economy be modified?**

A token economy can and should be modified throughout the year. This includes modifying goals and objectives as well as reinforcers available. Over time, students should begin to consistently achieve the targeted goals. At this point, you should begin to reassess the areas in which they need improvement. You should begin working with the student to set new goals or longer intervals, not forgetting to give congratulations and praise for "graduating" from the original/prior program. Conversely, not earning enough tokens to get rewards can result in the student becoming frustrated or giving up. In such instances, changes such as goal modification, shortened time intervals, or targeting fewer goals need to be made.

**What about response cost in a token economy?**

• Some people include a form of "response cost" in their token economy. This involves penalizing students for inappropriate behavior by taking away tokens they have earned. The ethics of taking away what a student has fairly earned is questionable. Also, a threat to the student is implicit in response cost. Response cost may lead to a student behaving appropriately only out of fear or anxiety of losing points or tokens. Additionally, it may lead to power struggles that become setting events for undesired behaviors.
How can I phase out a token economy?

- One way is by changing the rewards from which students may choose. For instance, rather than earning a candy bar for appropriate behavior, let the student take the attendance to the office every morning, contingent upon continued appropriate behavior. You can also reduce the number of tokens that a student earns, requiring the student to do more work for the same number of tokens. In some cases, you may find that no matter what you do, it seems that as soon as the token economy is dropped, so is the appropriate behavior. In this case, the token economy has become a behavior management tool rather than a behavior modification tool.

Is there anything else I should consider?

- It is recommended that other behavioral interventions be used with a token economy.
- Token economies have the advantage of being an intervention that can be used at home and school. For example, students may wish to choose reinforcers that exist at home.
- When implementing your token economy in the classroom, it is important to remember to give the student verbal praise for appropriate behavior and for achieving goals, and to review the rules with students as needed.
- Remember to choose tokens which are not easily accessible outside of the classroom. Otherwise, you may suddenly find that the student seems to be spending a lot more tokens than he or she is earning!
- You do not need to wait to get to know your students before beginning a token economy. Starting one as soon as necessary prevents the student from having to unlearn poor behavior that was previously tolerated in the classroom.
- While a token economy can be very intricate and time-consuming, it can also be designed to be very simple and easy to implement.
- As with any intervention, it is important that a token economy be carried out with consistency before it is modified.

References

