

PSY 220: Behavior Management

Token Economies and Group Contingencies

Psychologists have long recognized the power of social situations on our behavior. Through the day we evaluate our surroundings in such a way as to determine what behaviors are required of us under certain circumstances and we act accordingly.

We began to learn these skills through our initial socialization experiences as children and then on through our interactions with various social institutions such as schools.

The behavioral strategies of **Token Economies** and **Group Contingencies** take advantage of the social situations that our subjects find themselves in. We continue to manipulate the As and Cs in these strategies but we add the extra power of social control.

Token Economies

Consider for a moment the term “economy”. Where have you heard this before? We hear it in the news ALL the time! The economy is the social institution where we encounter trade, financial transaction, work, etc. etc. in our society. It is a social institution (see my statements above) so as such it has taught us specific norms, values, and expectations of behavior if we are participate in the economy.

In essence, the economy informs us how to go about getting the things we want. Our economy is culture specific so the way WE in the US go about getting what we want may be different than what other people in other parts of the world have to do. It also changes over time. What we do NOW to get what we want from the economy may be different than what we used to do and may be different from what we are going to be doing in the future.

Token Economies in a classroom reflect the same structure as does the grand economy of our country. But lets first get into some definitions.

Token

A token is an object that represents value. In our national economy we may call it the “dollar”. The value of this dollar is dependent on what it can be exchanged for since it has no inherent value of its own. So a Token Economy is only as good as the real reinforcers that the tokens can buy!

Setting up and Economy

Just like in the real economy, a token economy “pays” us for certain activities. Some activities are worth a “lot” and some are not worth a “lot”. In addition, some rewards COST a “lot” while others don’t COST as much.

When you are designing a Token Economy it is critical that you be fair. Hard tasks should earn more tokens than easy tasks (raising your hand is easier than handing in paper on time so it should be worth less tokens). In addition you should put fair prices on the rewards...you want to make sure that BIG rewards take a lot of work to get....just like in the real economy!

Advantages of Token Economies

The greatest advantage of Token Economies is that you have one, class-wide behavior plan that can be responsive to the different behavioral needs of each child. Some kids need to earn tokens for basic skills while others can still earn tokens for more difficult skills.

Let's say that one child has issues with turn taking in conversations...you might reward them tokens for doing that...another child may have difficulty making speeches...so you reward them for that...and then, you can always reward "catching them doing something good" tokens for everyone!

Other benefits include:

- Behaviors are easy to measure...you count the tokens
- It is easy to deliver the reinforcer right away when the behavior is seen...the teacher carries them around!
- Token Economies control the TEACHER'S behavior! The teacher is motivated to catch you doing good things...so they can reward tokens!
- You can adjust the Token Economy to account for new behaviors all the time! As kids learn and develop you can change the requirements...if new problems or requirements come about, you can easily incorporate them into the plan!