In higher education there is a growing need to create assignments and opportunities for students to work in groups to prepare them for the workforce. Research indicates that the success of these groups depends on how instructors facilitate group work. In this program, Ryerson’s teaching chairs provide advice on how to effectively facilitate group work.

Research has confirmed that group work can offer students powerful learning experiences. Collaboration in groups prepares students for the workforce enabling them to create new knowledge by working together in solving problems. But without a basic understanding of small group dynamics it's unlikely that students will accrue the potential benefits of collaboration. When asked about the implementation of group work in the classroom, instructors have expressed frustration with choosing an assignment well suited to collaboration, dividing students into groups and dealing with student conflicts or disruptive group members.

The most common problems for students using group work in the classroom are an absence of leadership and coordination. Students often have difficulty communicating, defining group goals, and assigning tasks. Often, when group work fails, it is because tasks weren't well suited to group work, deadlines were unrealistic, or there was no peer support. It is important to prepare students with strategies for collaboration, to design assignments to meet specific learning objectives, and to be clear about how collaborative work will be graded.

The success or failure of group work rests largely on careful planning and design. Assignments and tasks should be designed to fit the student’s abilities and to allow for a fair division of work and interdependence. When assigning group work for online courses, provide the students with the technology tools that can facilitate their meetings and online collaboration. Your students will need to learn about these tools and practice using them effectively. Examples of these tools are Google Docs, Wikis, blogs, voice over IP communication tools like Skype, and other tools that might be available within your course management system.

When you’re forming the student groups, make sure that the activity is actually worthy of being a group activity first. Then the groups can be formed either by the students or by the instructor. Students often prefer creating their own groups, while instructors sometimes want to create the groups based on other objectives. When you’re deciding which method to use, keep in mind that research has shown that the grades assigned to group projects do not really differ greatly between projects using either student-formed or instructor-formed groups. Get to know your students though before you form the groups. For example, during class you can have the students write a one minute paper about their skill strengths, or in online classes you can ask the students to post their one minute paper on the discussion board.

To help students get off to a strong start, provide them with a project charter template to fill out before beginning work with their group. Having a project charter reduces the possibility of conflict. A formal charter also helps set the groundwork for effective conflict resolution. After creating the
group charter, clear goals and responsibilities should be assigned to each member. Details about each goal should also be identified.

Effective groups must be able to decide if they need a leader, and if so how to select their leader and what the leader's job will be. One possible suggestion is for students to use self managed work teams. In self managed work teams, the leadership role rotates with a different member chairing each meeting. The leader is responsible for setting the agenda and outcomes for the meeting and sending group members information ahead of time. The leader's also responsible for encouraging team members and keeping the group on track.

It's important to prepare students with strategies for collaboration, to design assignments to meet specific learning objectives, and to be clear about how collaborative work will be graded. Conduct regular assessments of the process to see what is and isn't working. When assessing group work, consider whether you're assessing the process or the product. What criteria will be used to evaluate the work? And how will you distribute the marks? Inform your students if you will be giving a shared grade or an individual grade.