We love using small group learning in our online classes. Learning to establish and facilitate small groups, especially in an online environment, is a new skill for many instructors. Hearing horror stories from other colleagues, or indeed from students themselves, causes some instructors to shy away from using the small group capabilities in an LMS, chat room, or video conferencing software. However, a well-structured and purposeful small group experience can allow the online student to work intimately with a small group of people and experience success as a team member. Successful small group work offers the student a greater sense of community, can increase enthusiasm and motivation with coursework, and can also be used as a stepping stone to larger class projects during the overall progression of a course. Collaboration also addresses multiple learning styles, reduces online isolation, provides students opportunities to test out real-world practices, and it allows students to gain competence in using teamwork, critical in the workplace.
Most LMSs offer the capability to group students within an online course. In Figure 5.1, we see an example of an interface that allows students to enter their groups by clicking on “Groups” in the left navigation bar.

After clicking on “Groups,” students can select the group they wish to participate in from a list.

Once in a group, students are provided with a tool set typically consisting of group e-mail (any e-mail sent from within group e-mail will only go to members in the group), a group drop box, group discussion board, and group chat. Only students added to a particular group by the instructor are able to see and participate in that group. This ability of the tool helps promote cohesion in the course by creating communication among small groups of students. One of the main goals in using groups is to promote a deepened sense of community among all class members.

In chat or video conferencing, small group discussions can be accomplished using breakout rooms, private chat rooms that allow users to leave a main discussion and breakout into smaller discussion groups.

Groups can be organized in many ways and for a variety of purposes. For example, groups might be established to work on a particular project or to