

Stories in Stitches

By Heather Jefkins

Grade Level: 4, 5/6, 7/8, 9/10

Magazine Issue: "[Crafts in Canada](#)" (February 2026), *Kayak: Canada's History Magazine for Kids*

Time Required: 1-2 lessons

Select Curriculum Connections:

ONTARIO | Social Studies 2: Changing family and community traditions | Social Studies 6: Cultural and social aspects of different communities in Canada

ALBERTA | Social Studies 1: Expressions of culture and how it can be passed on

NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR | Social Studies 6: Expressions of cultural beliefs, values, and traditions and how they shape identity

BRITISH COLUMBIA | Social Studies 1, 2, 3: Diverse characteristics of communities and cultures locally and throughout Canada

NOVA SCOTIA | Social Studies 3: Examining Nova Scotian culture through stories, language, music and dance, and visual arts and crafts | Social Studies 6: Expressions of culture

Learning Outcomes:

Students will:

- Identify how culture, community, and identity are expressed through the development of traditional knitting patterns.
- Recognize how traditional Indigenous crafts were affected by settler knowledge and the control of Indigenous populations by the Canadian Government and Residential School System in the 20th century.

Activity:

PART I – Introduction

Provide your students with a quick overview of traditional fibre arts, such as knitting, crocheting, embroidery and quilting. This can lead to a discussion about traditional outerwear from various locations in Canada. Possible discussion topics: parkas, seal skin mitts and boots, mukluks, moccasins, sweaters, socks, mittens, toques.

Have your students read the article “Useful and Special” to learn about some of the different crafts made throughout Canadian history.

PART II – Discussion

Have a group discussion with your students, asking: do they own any of the items discussed earlier or mentioned in the magazine? If so, are they factory-made, hand-crafted or a combination of the two? Do they know anyone who practices traditional hand crafts such as knitting, crocheting or sewing?

PART III – Activity

Introduce students to the Cowichan sweater. You can share historic photographs, such as [this one](#), [this one](#), and [this one](#) from Library and Archives Canada.

For younger students, you can explain the [history of the sweater](#). It is important to remember that this regional craft tradition was commodified and appropriated throughout the 20th century, and that Coast Salish people began a program to reclaim the sweater in the 1970s.

For older students, have them independently research the history behind the sweater and the Coast Salish people. Some suggested resources, include:

- “[The Cowichan Sweater Knitted Legacy](#),” Absolutely Canadian, CBC Gem.
- “[The Coast Salish Knitters and the Cowichan Sweater: An Event of National Historic Significance](#),” Marianne P. Stopp.
- “[The Cowichan sweater documentary shines a light on the history of the famed West Coast garment](#),” Dana Gee, *Vancouver Sun*, 3 November 2023.

PART IV – Design Challenge

Students will design a sweater pattern using no more than three colours representing an animal that is native to their location, along with geometric patterns to complete the overall look of the sweater. The final product will include a front and back view of the sweater.

Design guidance: *Remind students that they should not copy or closely imitate Cowichan sweater patterns, layouts or motifs (such as Coast Salish animals), but rather should create original designs inspired by their own location and personal or family connections.*

Cultural appropriation and context: *Cultural appropriation is the use of another people's culture without permission. Cultural appreciation, on the other hand, involves respect and learning with permission and through supporting creators from that culture. For decades imitation Cowichan sweaters were produced without permission and wrongly marketed under Cowichan names for very low prices.*

For this assignment, we are learning about the Cowichan sweater as a case study in how craft expresses identity. We are not using Cowichan designs as inspiration for our own patterns.

PART V – Wrap-Up: Sharing and Reflecting

Students will share their designs with the class and explain the elements behind their designs.

Extension:

Appropriation vs. Appreciation

For older students, have them research the ways that Cowichan sweaters have been used by corporations. Some suggested resources include:

- “[First Nation alleges Olympic ripoff](#),” CBC, 7 October 2009.
- “[Cowichan sweater knitters concerned over Eddie Bauer replica](#),” Chek News, 10 November 2025.

- ["After years of exploitation, the iconic Cowichan sweater is being protected with a new fair-trade program," IndigiNews, 24 October 2023.](#)

Ask students to write a short opinion piece regarding whether they believe companies who have produced “knock-off” Indigenous designs are demonstrating an appreciation for the designs or whether they are simply appropriating the designs for a profit. Can they think of other designs that have been appropriated for clothing in other areas of Canada?

Students will share and discuss their ideas regarding what their opinion is regarding the topic.

Additional Activities:

- Look at a regional crafts by inviting in guests who practice traditional crafts. Many communities have groups such as Quilting Guilds, Spinning and Weaving groups, and Knitting / Crocheting groups. If you are unfamiliar with local groups, try contacting a local yarn or fabric store; they will be familiar with who might be willing to run a small “trunk show” to showcase their expertise.
- Older students might look at articles around the resurgence of traditional crafts in Canada and discuss how these crafts are being preserved.