Out there thinking:

Rural innovation and the pragmatics of place

October 19, 2022

Innovation in Littleton, NH

What are pragmatics?

- How context contributes to meaning
- The practical, lived relationship between people and, in this case, place
- Examples
  - rural politeness and interdependence → “critical friend” approaches to professional learning may face resistance in rural places
  - rural traditionalism → collaborating (and sharing power) with rural people to co-create innovations that engage their local priorities is a good practice

Why do pragmatics of place matter to rural innovation?

- They connect us to lived experience
- They help us understand what is important locally
- They clue us into resources and assets
- They honor place attachment and local history
- They acknowledge variability across communities

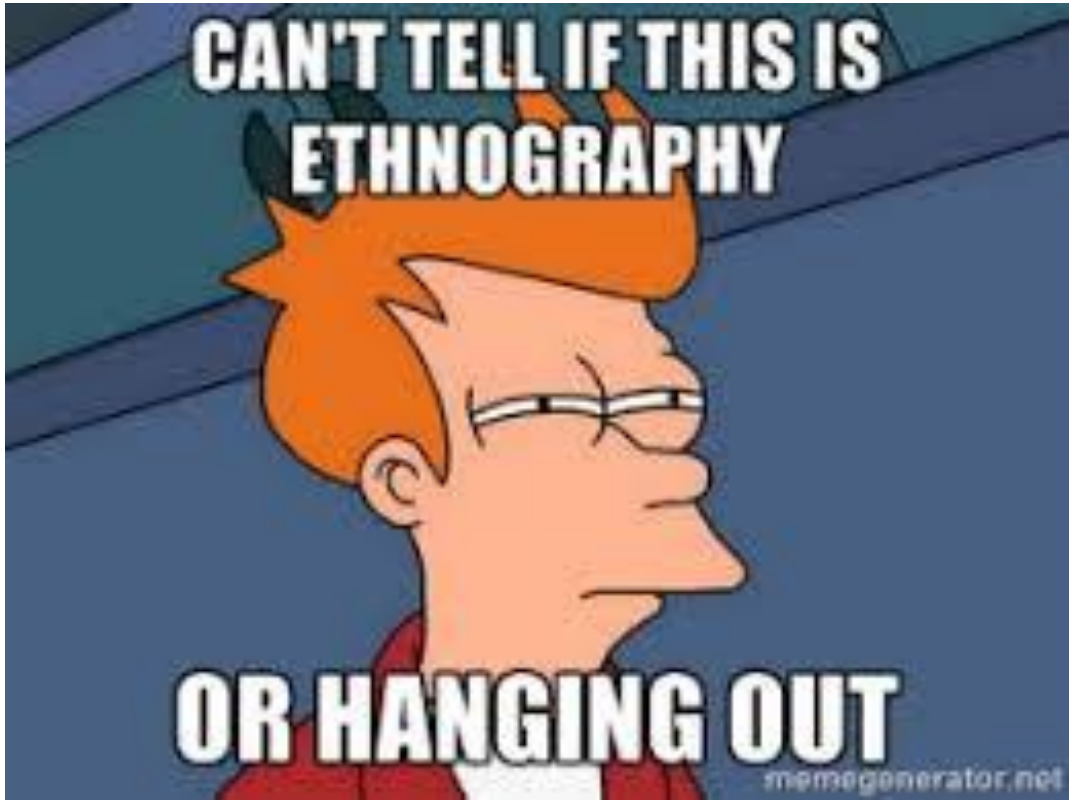
Innovation in Evansville, MN

Proposed principles of rural innovation

- Liberate your inner ethnographer
- Engage people with lived experience to co-create innovation
- Pay attention to local AND regional context
- Take small steps
- Favor reversibility
- Plan on surprises and human ingenuity

Liberate your inner ethnographer

- Partner with your evaluator
- Get out into the field
- Observe, observe, observe
- Ask questions
- Proximity is an important pathway to innovation



Engage people with lived experience

Innovation at the STAR School, AZ

Pay attention to local AND regional context

- No town is an island
- Recent education issues
- Micropolitics
- Local and regional resources
- Local traditions and rituals

Take small steps

Favor reversibility

- Irreversible interventions have irreversible consequences
- Innovations should bend to people, not the other way around

Plan on surprises & human ingenuity

- Accommodate the likelihood of the unforeseen
- Assume that those who use an innovation will have, or will develop, experience and insight to improve it

"We like to bring together people from radically different fields and wait for the friction to produce heat, light and magic. Sometimes it takes a while."

Discussion

- What pragmatics of place have **you** observed? What do they suggest to you about what matters locally?
- What additional principles for rural innovation might you suggest?
- What are some of your lessons learned about rural innovation?