



Remembering Norma Presmeg, 1942-2026 – an obituary

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Photo: private

On February 25, 2026, Mathematics Education lost a great mind and a great heart with the passing of Dr. Norma C Presmeg, Professor Emerita. She was home with family in Maryville, Tennessee, accompanied by classical music as she left this earth at age 83. Instrumental in the development and advancement of her field worldwide, Norma had educational involvement on multiple continents during her long career. In South Africa, she was named valedictorian at Port Shepstone High School, then attended Rhodes Univer-

sity and the University of Natal. Twelve years of teaching high school mathematics followed. In 1985, she earned her PhD from the University of Cambridge, England. Her dissertation, *The Role of Visually Mediated Processes in High School Mathematics: A Classroom Investigation*, was supervised by Alan Bishop. After the completion of her PhD she returned to South Africa where she taught at the University of Durban-Westville. After emigrating to the United States in 1990, she served on the faculty at Florida State University, followed by Illinois State University, where she was promoted to Professor of Mathematics. During this time, she was proud to become a U.S. Citizen, although she often referred to herself as a “citizen of the world.”

Beloved by students through the years for her genuine interest in their learning and growth, Norma was always sup-

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portive and generous with her time. Her former PhD students pepper the globe and are now leaders in their own right. She was known to say “Maths is beautiful!” as she bridged the gap between the arts and sciences, never losing enthusiasm for the unassailable elegance and logic of mathematics, nor taking lightly the responsibilities of teaching. Her attention to detail, academic rigor, and integrity served the community well during many decades of assisting colleagues throughout the world.

Her oeuvre embraces an impressive list of themes, in which she did research and published papers. She edited several books during her academic career; one of the most important is certainly the book on *Transitions between contexts for mathematical practices* together with Abreu and Bishop in 2008. She edited a book on *Signs of signification: Semiotics in mathematics education* together with Radford, Roth and Kadunz in 2018, which has come out of the 13th International Congress on Mathematical Education (ICME-13), held in 2016 in Hamburg, building on a pre-conference publication. Out of this congress came another book, which she edited with the second author, *Compendium for Early Career Researchers in Mathematics Education* (published in 2019), in which she shared her enormous knowledge on researching in mathematics education with the community. The book *Approaches to qualitative research in mathematics education: Examples of methodology and methods* edited together with Bikner-Ahsbabs and Knipping (published in 2015) contributes in the same vein and draws on her extensive experience of researching mathematics education.

Norma published an enormous number of refereed papers in journals, books, and conference proceedings, on an impressive and broad list of themes such as mathematical visualizations and representations, semiotics and its education, and taking a Peircean lens for the development of theoretical approaches. Furthermore, cultural issues in mathematics education with a focus on sociocultural mediation, identity and race were important themes of her work over decades. A paper on a semiotic framework for linking practice and classroom mathematics presented an integration of these different themes, which proved that for Norma these themes were not seen as being distinct but as contributing to the improvement of mathematics education and the research on it. In addition to this influential offering, she was interested in Krutetskii’s perspective on imagery and published on this topic, followed by work on problem solving. Finally, she contributed to the theme of mathematics education research embracing arts and sciences, in which she integrated her interests in music and arts.

She was an active and contributing member of many organizations, particularly the *International Committee of the International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education* (PME) and PME-North American Chapter. Over several decades, she was an active and valued member of the PME community, including her service as an IC

Board member, fostering international collaboration. Along with presentations both small and large, she ran a discussion group on *Semiotic and cultural aspects of mathematics* at the 27th conference of PME/25th conference of PME-NA in Hawai’i in 2003, and a research forum on the *Legacy of Leen Streefland* at 25th PME in Utrecht in 2001. She gave a plenary talk on a *Semiotic view of the role of imagery and inscriptions in mathematics teaching and learning* at the 30th PME in Prague, in 2006. In addition, she offered a seminar on *Quality reviewing of scholarly papers* at the 32nd PME/30th PME-NA in Morelia in 2008, in which she shared her immense knowledge on editing and reviewing with the mathematics education community.

She was similarly engaged in the work and activities of the *International Commission on Mathematical Instruction* (ICMI), to which she contributed strongly, including to the symposium of the first century of ICMI in 2008 with a contribution on *Semiotic theoretical frameworks, creativity, and imaginative rationality in mathematics education*. To the ICMI study on mathematics education as a research domain – a search for identity edited by Sierpinska and Kilpatrick, she contributed the foundational paper *Balancing complex human worlds: Mathematics education as an emergent discipline in its own right*, in which she emphasized that mathematics education is still a young and developing field, but is a research field on its own - independent, although closely connected to mathematics as its basis. She regularly assumed responsibilities within the conference series *International Congress on Mathematics Education* (ICME), which take place under the auspices of ICMI every four years. She organized topic study groups and discussion groups on language and communication (ICME-9, Makuhari/Chiba, 2000; ICME-10, Copenhagen, 2004), visualization in mathematics education (ICME-11, Monterrey, 2008), and semiotics in mathematics education (ICME-13, Hamburg, 2016). At ICME-6 in Budapest, 1988, she was chairperson and panel member of *Visualization in School Mathematics*, and chairperson for *Curriculum for the year 2000*. In addition, she presented at the *Fifth special day on mathematics, education, and society* of ICME-6 her ideas on *Mathematics education and cultural continuity*. In addition, she contributed papers to the various ICMEs starting with ICME-4 in Berkeley in 1980.

She was generous in sharing her enormous knowledge at smaller or regional conferences as well, especially in North America and South Africa. She was truly an international scholar, not restricting cooperation to high-level research; many of her international collaborations included PhD program consulting at various conferences. Her many contributions defy summation.

Norma strongly supported the mathematics educational community through her editorial work, reviewing for numerous journals, not only in mathematics education. From this

work, her contribution to the journal *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, one of the flagship journals in mathematics education, stands out. From 2000 to 2008, she served as one of the four (later five) editors of the journal; from 2009 to 2013 she served as editor-in-chief. Her editorial work was legendary; her constructive recommendations combined with accuracy and high-quality standards moved the journal to the inclusion in the Social Science Citation Index in 2012. In the last years she supported *ZDM – Mathematics Education*, another flagship journal in mathematics education in SSCI since 2020, with her work as language editor. However, her contribution exceeded language-oriented suggestions; she provided feedback regarding the coherency of the paper and flow of ideas. Her work was always characterized by a high level of respects for the thoughts and ideas of the authors. It was an honor for everyone who had the opportunity to benefit from her as an editor.

Beyond this editorial work, she contributed numerous, often-cited papers to a number of journals, including *Educational Studies in Mathematics* and *ZDM - Mathematics Education* (starting already during the journal's time as *Zentralblatt für Didaktik der Mathematik*). With these papers fulfilling high-quality standards, she was a role model, not only for early career researchers, but for all of us.

Returning to Norma's personal life, she was a lifelong learner who excelled at whatever she took on, academic or otherwise – whether playing piano, learning new languages just for the challenge, avidly gardening, or knitting complex

masterpieces. A traveler and explorer of nature, she appreciated the beauty she found around her, and loved to watch the changing sky. Similarly, she saw the best in others. With tremendous strength of character, she lived a principled life, holding herself accountable to the highest standards. She remained active in her church, and, although always modest, with time she became even less interested in accolades and distinctions, and more interested in personal growth.

After a lifetime of service to others, during which her great intellect and kindness touched thousands of lives, she leaves this world an improved place – not just by what she *did*, but by who she *was*. May her legacy live on through us, inspired by her peerless example.

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